

Fight Disease, Not Patients:

AIDS Protest in Delhi

ON February 28, 1990, National Science Day, nine voluntary workers and organisations organised a siting protest at the office of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi, to protest against the antipeople AIDS policy of the government. About 150 people, including students and teachers, prostitutes, leprosy patients, and an HIV positive patient from Goa and his friends, participated.

Ms Lalita conducted the proceedings which began with an account of how some voluntary organisations and activists have been working at GB Road, Delhi's redlight area, over the 'last year and a half, and have found that prostitutes are being harassed and subjected to forcible testing. Two leprosy patients recounted how they faced discrimination everywhere. They observed that the Indian Lepers Act, 1898, passed by the British rulers and the WDS Prevention Bill, 1989, have many draconian features in common. They felt that AIDS patients are likely to face the same kind of harassment that leprosy patients have faced for centuries. The agony of the HIV positive patients from Goa, who was jailed forever two months, was also described.

Slogans against the inhuman policies of the government and the medical establishment were raised, and copies of the memorandum distributed to ICMR staff and passersby. Some Observers contended that by fighting for the rights of prostitutes and homosexuals we were legitimising these groups whereas they deserved to be misled. We countered these arguments and held a discussion. The memorandum handed over to Dr A.S. Paintal, director, ICMR, well known for his inhuman and impractical proposals regarding AIDS prevention, stated:

The government has hopelessly failed to respond to the problem of AIDS in a humane and effective way. According

to its own projections, there could be up to a million HIV positive cases in the country... we protest the way in which the medical establishment is using this serious public health challenge to fan a newkind of medical terrorism... the announcement from the premier health institute in the country (AIMS) that its doors are now shut to those human beings who have the HIV virus or AIDS...is not only a breach of the medical profession's compact with society, it also violates the citizen's fundamental right to life and liberty.

... If the only groups that health authorities test for HIV are prostitutes, professional blood donors and people who visit STD clinics, then they will obviously come to the absurd... conclusion that most HIV positive people belong to these categories. This is blatantly false...out of 400 HIV positive cases tested at at AIMS, only one is a prostitute.... Still, the ICMR and AIIMS forcibly tested prostitutes in Delhi with the help of the police last year. No one even bothered to inform them of the results.

... We have repeatedly asked ICMR... to supply quality latest condoms (which provide nearly 100 percent protection against HIV) in Delhi's red light areas, but to no avail. We also demand a rehabilitation scheme for HIV positive prostitutes and professional blood donors....

Effective preventive education and voluntary testing, with informed consent and anonymity, alone can halt the spread of HIV infection.... Where poor, already stigmatised people are concerned, the authorities violate confidentiality without thinking twice....But big blood product manufacturing companies are let off the hook. Last year, the National Institute of Virology, Pune, refused to divulge the names of those companies whose market samples tested positive for

HIV.

The WHO guidelines state that "there is no public health rationale to justify isolation, quarantine or discrimination based on a person's HIV status or sexual behaviour."....The denial of health care to people with AIDS also has no scientific basis...

Our demands:

1. End forcible testing and replace it with voluntary anonymous testing along with a scheme of adequate pension....
2. All doctors and health workers who refuse to treat AIDS patients to be guilty of professional misconduct.
3. Suspend all medical persons at AIIMS who refused to treat the HIV positive African diplomat, who died untreated there.
4. Enforce strict screening procedures and criminal penalties for blood banks and blood manufacturing companies.
5. Disseminate quality latex condoms, disposable syringes and nonmoralistic safe sex education.
6. Conduct thorough survey of HIV infection which guarantees anonymity to participants so that the pattern of infection in India is properly understood.
7. Release all HIV positive people detained in jails, 'hospitals, vigilance homes and under house arrest all over the country.

Without these measures, government will sanction a witch hunt against already marginalise groups-women (especially prostitutes), professional blood donors, homosexuals, street children, drug addicts, foreigners and prisoners.... Government and ICMR should fight AIDS, not people with AIDS.

- J.P. Jain, P.S. Sahni, Lalitha S.A. and others