

Harm Reduction – An Adapted and Effective Approach in Egypt

SUMMARY : The twin epidemics of injecting drug use and HIV infection linked to the sharing of injection equipment have a major impact on the health and social and economic wellbeing of many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region. In collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and funding agencies such as the US Agency for International Development, the Drosos Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, Family Health International (FHI) in Egypt focused on building the institutional and programmatic capacity of the nongovernmental organizations Freedom, Befrienders, Waay, and Hayat to provide HIV/AIDS prevention and care services to injecting drug users (IDUs) in Greater Cairo.

KEY POINTS

FHI/Egypt tailored harm reduction activities to the local context by

- ▶ providing outreach to active IDUs through former IDUs
- ▶ establishing a safe and attractive comprehensive care center (CCC)
- ▶ adopting a culturally adapted approach addressing both safe sex and safe injecting
- ▶ fostering partnerships with the MoH, local NGOs, and funding agencies

Background

Family Health International (FHI) is a nonprofit NGO providing state-of-the-art interventions in international public health. FHI tailors programs to local needs and advocates for compassionate, realistic, and appropriately resourced responses in the areas of reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. FHI/Egypt has spearheaded many prevention and care programs; developed national policies, guidelines, and curricula; trained healthcare providers; designed and distributed strategic behavioral

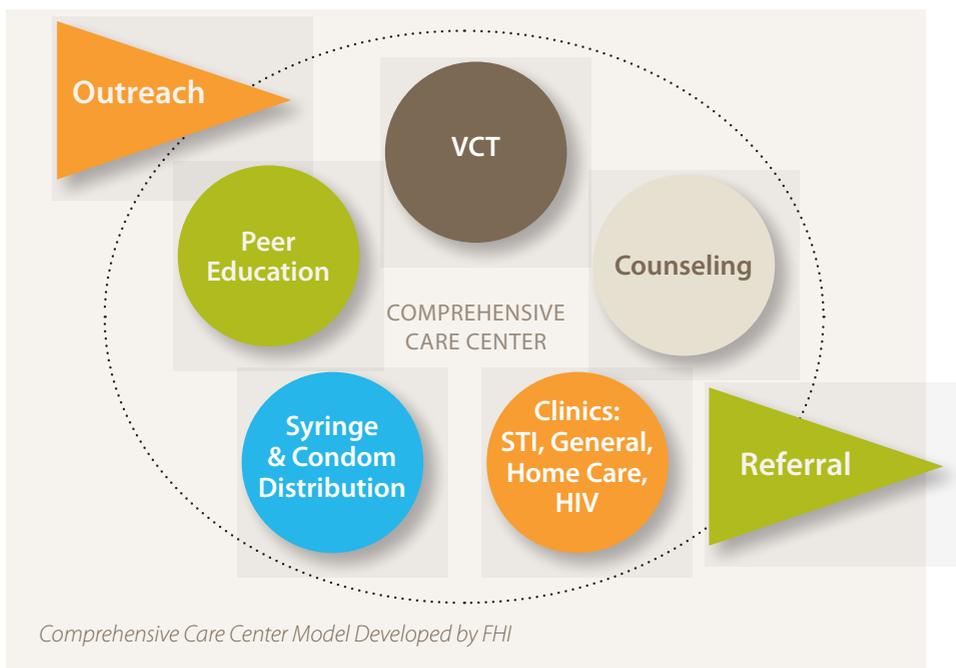
communication (SBC) materials focusing on HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention; established voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) centers and successful model STI clinics; and promoted voluntary, regular, non-remunerated blood donation. FHI conducted Egypt's first Biological and Behavioral Surveillance Survey among most-at-risk populations (MARPs) and designed and implemented tailored programs for HIV prevention and care among them.

Challenges

- ▶ IDUs are hard to reach and are highly stigmatized.
- ▶ Being in possession of used injecting equipment is criminalized.
- ▶ Methadone substitution is illegal.
- ▶ Some IDUs practice risky sexual and injecting behaviors.

Activities

FHI selected NGOs who would be good partners in implementing programs for IDUs. We worked to strengthen the financial and administrative structure of those selected.



FHI/Egypt tailored harm reduction activities to the specific political, legal, and social context.



A poster developed by FHI focusing on safe injecting

FHI established a comprehensive care center (CCC) located close to slum areas where risky behaviors prevail. Former IDUs conducted outreach. The CCC provides the following voluntary anonymous services:

- ▶ Risk reduction counseling and VCT for HIV (using rapid test kits)
- ▶ Basic clinical care for IDUs, clinical and nursing care for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA), and management of STIs
- ▶ Peer education, one-on-one and group counseling
- ▶ Distribution of needles/syringes and condoms
- ▶ Support groups for PLHA
- ▶ Referral to the MoH for related laboratory tests, ARV therapy, and hospital admission
- ▶ Economic and spiritual support

We also developed a package of tools for use at the CCC. These include training manuals and guidelines for VCT, STIs, clinical and nursing care for PLHA, and home based care (HBC) guidelines. We produced monitoring and evaluation tools, including data collection forms for services delivered (short intake form for IDUs reached, long intake form for those accessing the site, a VCT form, an STI form, an HBC form, and a medical form), an electronic database for data management, and monthly reports. FHI created SBC graphic representations of harm reduction messages targeting drug users, and developed standard operating procedures for the CCC.

To build the capacity of CCC staff, who include physicians, nurses, outreach workers, counselors, a program officer, managers, and administrative and financial staff, FHI provided tailored training on VCT, clinical and nursing care for PLHA, HBC, management of STIs, communication skills, peer education,



A poster developed by FHI focusing on safe sex

counseling, and harm reduction in addition to data management.

Hallmarks of the FHI/Egypt Harm Reduction Approach

FHI/Egypt tailored harm reduction activities to the specific political, legal, and social context in which they operate.

- ▶ Former IDUs provided peer education and outreach.
- ▶ Most of the needs of IDUs were addressed in one attractive, safe place.
- ▶ A combined harm reduction approach tackled both safe sex and safe injecting.
- ▶ Former IDUs and detected PLHA were empowered through their recruitment as outreach workers.
- ▶ New syringes and needles were supplied without exchange for new ones.
- ▶ Male condoms were promoted and distributed.

The Way Forward

FHI/Egypt believes that there is still much to be done regarding harm reduction among IDUs. FHI has the capacity to accomplish more in this area. FHI has the required technical expertise and extremely productive relationships with MoH and NGO representatives in Egypt and throughout the MENA region. ■



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