



Public Education and Outreach for the
Forgotten Epidemic

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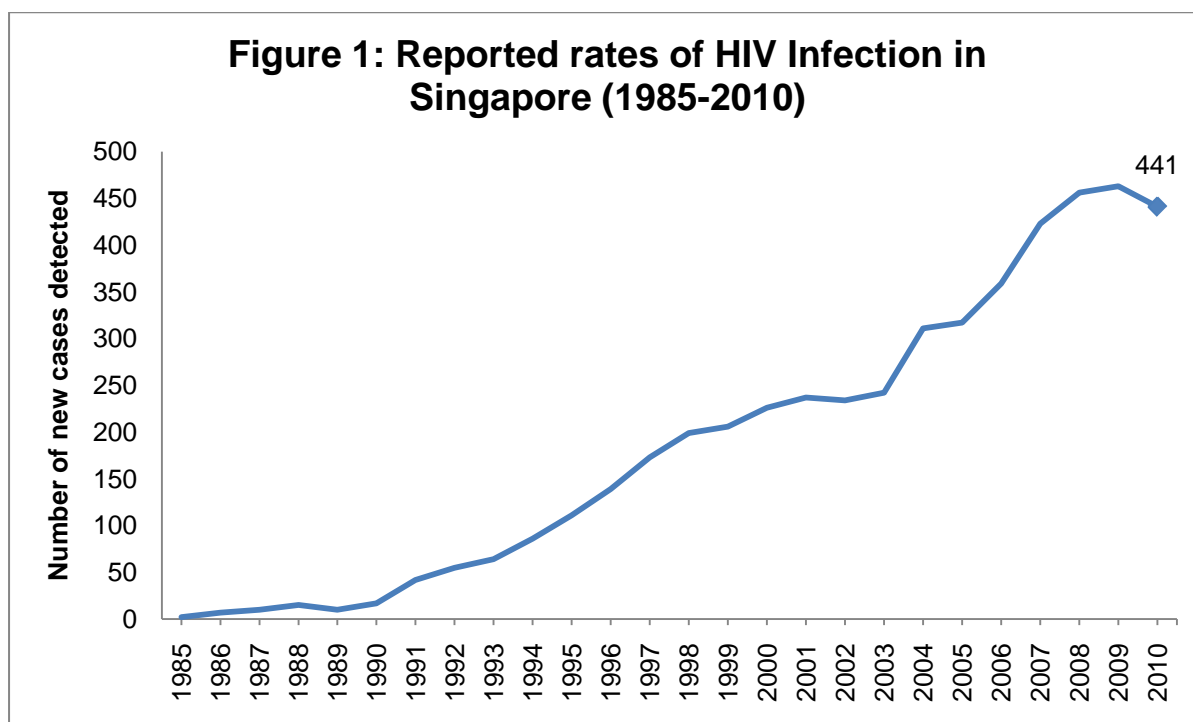
The article provides information on the HIV situation in Singapore and suggests that concern for HIV as a personal risk and a threat to public health have declined over the years despite a worsening trend of HIV infection. There appears a need to strengthen the measures in public education and outreach. An overview of the recent effort in public education and possible suggestions to further the cause are also provided in the article.

After three decades since the first case of HIV infection was detected in the world, the fight against the disease is far from over. In an event to commemorate World's AIDS Day last year, Former US Surgeon General, Dr Everett Koop called the disease "the forgotten epidemic." He said HIV was "no longer on the public's radar screen and the result is deadly serious." His comments could apply to Singapore.

HIV situation in Singapore

- 1) Singapore has not reversed the trend of increasing HIV infection cases

Despite more than two decades of public education and outreach, Singapore has not reversed the trend of increasing HIV infection cases. Although the number of reported HIV cases among Singapore residents (citizens and permanent residents) fell from 463 cases in 2009 to 441 cases in 2010, there has been a general increase in reported HIV infection rates since the first case was detected in 1985 (Figure 1). The prevalent rate -- though low by global standards -- increased from 0.8 cases per million persons in 1985 to 116.9 per million persons in 2010. As at 31 December 2010, there are 2319 asymptomatic HIV carriers, 1137 have or have had AIDS-related illnesses, and there have been 1389 deaths resulting from AIDS.



Source: Update on the HIV/AIDS Situation in Singapore 2010. www.moh.gov.sg.

2) There are also new groups identified with higher risk of HIV infection.

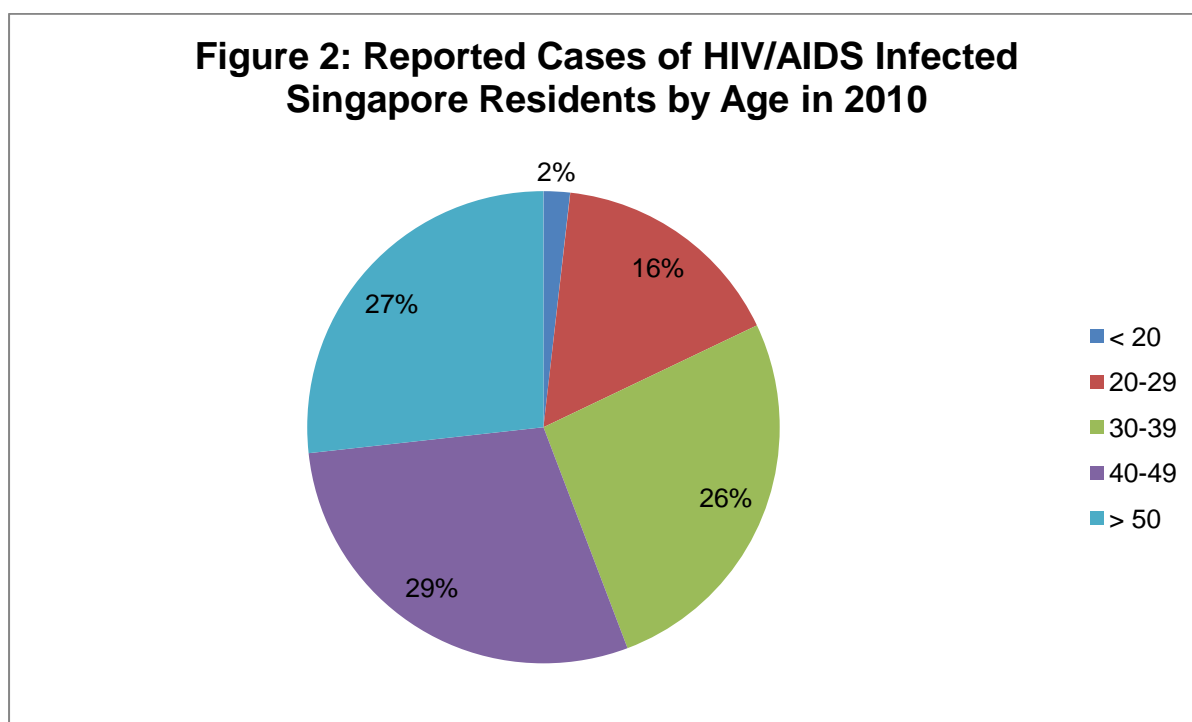
More older persons were reported as infected with HIV in 2010 compared with previous years. Table 1 shows that the 118 reported cases of older persons above 50 years old infected with HIV in 2010 were more than double the 54 cases reported in 2003.

Table 1: Reported cases of HIV/AIDS infected Singapore Residents by Age (1985-2010)

Age Group	1985-2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
0-9	17	1	3	3	3	2	0	0	1
10-19	13	1	4	4	2	9	7	3	7
20-29	363	29	47	44	57	55	69	65	71
30-39	666	83	89	95	100	106	130	125	116
40-49	435	74	89	84	98	134	125	128	128
50-59	191	32	44	56	66	87	82	82	68
60 & above	148	22	35	31	33	30	43	60	50

Source: Update on the HIV/AIDS Situation in Singapore 2010. www.moh.gov.sg.

As of 2010, Figure 2 suggests that the proportion of older persons above 50 (27%) is now comparable to the age groups of 30-39 (26%) and 40-49 (29%) commonly identified as having higher risks of being infected with HIV.



Source: Update on the HIV/AIDS Situation in Singapore 2010. www.moh.gov.sg.

Youths are also reported to be more at risk of contracting the disease. The Communicable Disease Surveillance Report 2009 reported that the incidence rate of having sexually transmitted infections (STIs) was highest among the 20-24 age group. Since 2003, 37 persons were infected with HIV when they were aged between 10 and 19 years.

3) The number of reported cases of HIV infection could be the tip of the iceberg.

Action for AIDS (AFA) President Professor Roy Chan commented in the Straits Times last year that those who undergo voluntary HIV screening are usually at low risk of HIV infection.

Amidst rising rates of HIV infection, the number of anonymous voluntary screening for HIV fell from 8373 in the first 10 months of 2009 to 7762 during the same period in 2010. In the meantime, HIV screening in public hospitals, prisons and drug rehabilitation centres are identifying HIV infected persons who would otherwise be undetected.

Table 2 shows that only 12 per cent of the new cases reported in 2010 were detected from voluntary screening as compared to 73 per cent from the course of medical care and routine health screening.

Table 2: Proportion of Reported HIV Cases by Method of Detection in 2010

Method by which cases were detected	%
Course of medical care	56
Routine health screening	17
Voluntary HIV screening	12
Screening in prisons and drug rehabilitation centres	5
Contact tracing and Other screening	10

Further, 54 per cent of HIV infected persons detected last year were in the late stages of the disease, suggesting those who are at high risk of infection are not undergoing regular HIV screening and are putting their sexual partners at risk of HIV infection.

4) Stigma of the disease might still be working against early detection and treatment

AIDS activists feel that the low testing rate is due to the stigma of the disease. There is also the fear of losing employment. Early detection would mean that those infected are likely to have a better response to the treatment and a higher quality of living. This would also lower the risk of transmitting the disease to their sex partners.

Efforts in addressing the HIV situation in Singapore

With regard to public education as a preventive health measure, the health authorities have pitched specific messages to their target groups. For youths, the message is “ABC”: Abstinence, Be faithful, and Condom use. For those who engage in casual sex and unprotected sex, it is “CAT”: Condom use and Testing. Last year, former Minister of Health Mr Khaw Boon Wan also encouraged early and frequent testing for those who with high risk lifestyles.

The Health Promotion Board also runs awareness programmes targeted at schools and the workplace.

- ***RESPECT - a Workplace HIV/AIDS Education Programme***

RESPECT (Rallying Employers to Support the Prevention, Education and Control of STI/HIV/AIDS) is a comprehensive programme for workplaces. It includes talks, workshops, exhibitions and other interactive programmes.

- ***Community Programmes***

Since 2006, HPB has organized large scale community events to raise awareness on HIV/AIDS to the public and to reduce the



A 2004 information booklet on HIV by the Health Promotion Board

stigma towards people living with HIV.

- **School AIDS Education Programme**

The School AIDS Education Programme aims to raise awareness of AIDS/sexually transmitted infections (STI) among school students, inform students about ways to prevent such infections and discourage promiscuous sexual behaviour.

Non-profit organisations also have several public outreach programmes. Events such as “Art Against AIDS”, an art competition organised by the AFA, and the annual Candlelight Memorial in remembrance of lives lost to the disease also helped to raise awareness. The event was organised by AFA, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, and the National University Hospital last year.

Some of the programmes include targeted initiatives. For example, AFA’s education and outreach programmes which reach out to specific groups include their High Risk Heterosexual Male Outreach Programme, MSM (men who have sex with men) Programme, Women and Girls Outreach Programme, and Transgender Programme. The Humanitarian Organisation on Migrant Economics has also organised seminars on HIV/AIDS to foreign workers.

A need to strengthen Public Education and Outreach

Prevention is better than cure. However, there appears to be less public education and outreach through television and the newspapers. Pamphlets and posters were also more widely circulated in the past. More could be done to encourage those at risk of contracting HIV to undergo regular screening. The present HIV situation in Singapore suggests that the current state of public education and outreach has to be strengthened, especially on occasions such as World AIDS Day.



in exchange
for a life on
medication

Is it worth it ?

A poster
emphasising the
high cost of casual
sex by Action for
AIDS

Publicity efforts to reach people who engage in activities that may expose them to HIV infection could be varied to suit specific groups, including older persons, youth, as well as new residents and foreigners. Singapore’s non-resident population has risen from about 754500 in 2000 to 1305000 in 2010 and although Singapore screens foreigners for their HIV status, public education and information on the risks of HIV infection should continue to be widely available during their stay here. Also, as Singapore residents travel increasingly for business and leisure, they should also be targeted by outreach programmes and encouraged to go for HIV screening following their travels abroad.

In addition to messaging such as “prevention is better than cure” which encourages abstinence from casual sex and emphasises the importance of the family, new messages about reducing the stigma towards the disease and the benefits of early detection could be included in publicity efforts.

Public education may be disseminated more effectively through the media. Documentaries and advertisements on HIV/AIDS could be an effective way to raise awareness, prevent HIV

infection and reduce stigma. Information on HIV/AIDS prevention could be more widely circulated. Such information could be made even more available in the form of leaflets, pamphlets and ZO cards in public spaces such as in community centres, libraries and coffee clubs.

Like other diseases, HIV/AIDS affects the health and mortality of a population. There are also economic consequences as HIV/AIDS tends to affect the economically productive working age population. Expenses would also be required for the provision of healthcare. Singapore has made much effort in restorative and preventive health measures in the recent years. However, more could be done to reduce HIV infection rates in Singapore.

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