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AIDS rates escalating

UNPROTECTED sex among gay and bisexual men is fuelling the spread of HIV/AIDS in Asia, public health experts said urging governments to do more to fight the problem.

Discriminatory laws criminalising certain sexual behaviours, such as sodomy, ought to be repealed so these men can more easily obtain information on disease prevention, drugs and treatment, they said.

"Unprotected male to male sex is once again fuelling the spread of HIV infection in the Asia Pacific," Massimo Ghidinelli, regional World Health Organisation HIV/AIDS advisor.

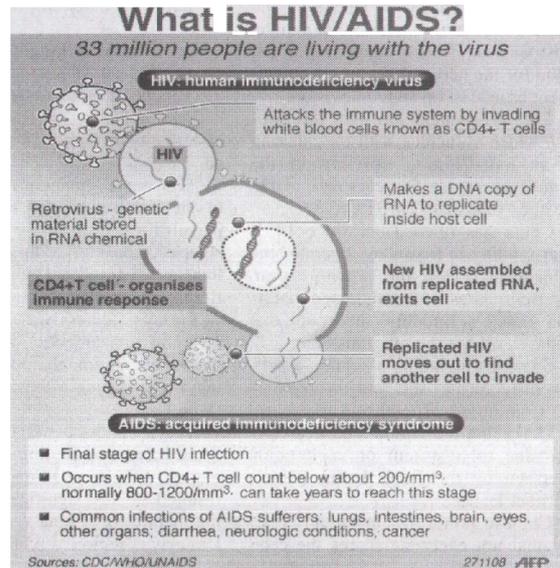
"The situation is likely to get worse unless we collectively undertake very urgent action. There is a possibility it may even go out of control."

HIV prevalence among gay and bisexual men in Bangkok rose to 30.7 per cent in 2007 from 17.3 per cent in 2003.

In Jakarta, it increased to 8.1 per cent from 2 per cent within the same period.

Some countries in Asia, such as Singapore, Malaysia and those in South Asia still have in place anti-sodomy laws, which are formidable barriers to people getting treatment and help, and they frustrate efforts at disease prevention, experts said.

"A young (gay) man went to a clinic for treatment and was slapped by a doctor and scolded



for being a bad person.

The doctor refused to treat him and he was thrown out," said Shivananda Khan of the help group Naz Foundation International.

"It is not uncommon, it happens in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar," Khan said.

"If (sodomy) is criminalised, it is a problem for doctors. What does the doctor do when someone comes in with an anal problem? He can get into trouble with the law because he is treating someone breaking the law."

In Thailand, HIV prevalence among gay and bisexual men is 24.6 per cent, while that of the

general population is 1.55 per cent.

In Cambodia, the rates are 7.8 per cent versus 1.8 per cent, while in China, it is 3.8 per cent versus 0.09 per cent, Frits van Griensven at the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention's Southeast Asia Regional Office said.

"Psychotropic drug (use among gay and bisexual men in Asia) play an important role here. I am not in favour of repression, the control needs to come from prevention.

People need to know how to do these things that you can't prevent in the safest way possible.