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Discrimination in China hinders AIDS fight

WHEN Meng Lin found out he was HIV-positive, he was forced to leave home, quit his job and change his name — the victim of intense discrimination experts say hinders China's fight against the disease.

Fifteen years later, Meng has finally landed on his feet. He works at an HIV/AIDS NGO and has a partner, but still keeps his disease a secret from his friends amid continuing prejudice in China, despite recent improvements.

"When I was diagnosed, there was no information (about HIV/AIDS), it was terrifying. Hospitals wouldn't accept me, they told me there was no room for me, doctors told me they didn't have any medicine," he said.

"I told my family and they asked me to leave home, as they wanted to protect themselves," Meng, who refused to reveal his exact age but said he was in his 40s, told AFP.

Frightened that he might be a threat to others and that he might not live much longer, he also decided to quit his job.

Only by changing his name, starting his own business and buying the life-saving antiretroviral drugs he needed from the United States was he able to survive and start leading a normal life.

Thirty years after the first AIDS cases were detected in the United States, China says that at least 740,000 people are living with HIV—the virus that causes AIDS—out of a total population of 1.3 billion, although some campaigners say the actual figure could be higher.

The government has repeatedly warned of a "grim" situation in China. In February, it said HIV/AIDS had become highly prevalent in some areas and in population groups, with rates of infection among homosexual men rising.

Nevertheless, experts and people living with HIV agree there has been progress over the years as the government has started talking more openly about the disease.

According to Meng, one area of significant improvement is the nationwide availability of free antiretroviral drugs.

A study published in *The Lancet* medical journal in May said China's efforts to scale up access to the drugs over the past years had resulted in national treatment coverage increasing from almost zero to 63.4 percent.

The report also found that HIV-related deaths had decreased by 60 percent.

But experts warn discrimination is still rife in the workplace and in hospitals, hindering these efforts.

"If people know they're going to lose their jobs and face discrimination in hospitals... they might not come forward and take an HIV test," said Richard Howard, an HIV/AIDS specialist at the International Labour Organization (ILO).

"Yet people who begin their treatment early are less likely to infect others. So now, more than ever, it's important that people feel comfortable to come forward and take an HIV test and know their rights will be protected."

A report released in May by the ILO found that people living with HIV/AIDS were still routinely denied treatment in hospitals. Meng, whose NGO is called the Chinese Alliance for People Living with HIV/AIDS, said he had endured such discrimination.

Several years ago, after suffering chest pains, he was diagnosed with angina and told he would need to have surgery. But when doctors found out he was HIV-positive, they refused to per-

form the operation.

"I considered getting surgery abroad, but it was too costly. Eventually, the problem got better and I survived without the operation," he said.

Discrimination in the workplace is also rife—and was brought to the fore by a landmark lawsuit last year by a young man from eastern China who said he was denied a job as a teacher because of his disease.

The plaintiff sued the local education department but ultimately lost the case. Meng has also experienced this first-hand. In 2005, he was organising an AIDS awareness event when journalists turned up with their cameras. He asked them not to film him, but they did and broadcast a report on television.

"My business partners found out I had HIV and were no longer willing to work with me. I had to leave my company as a result," he said, adding the incident led him to pursue NGO work full time. But Meng says there are signs of better acceptance in society—a claim reinforced by Wu Jihai, a migrant worker in northern China.

"Some of my colleagues know I'm an HIV patient, but they don't discriminate against me. One man even treats me better than before and helps me at work because he knows," he told AFP.

"We shake hands and talk, as if I was a healthy man who didn't have this disease. But I still cook and eat on my own, I don't have dinner with them."

Zhang Beichuan, a professor at Qingdao University and an expert on HIV/AIDS, said the government and media needed to raise public awareness about the virus.

"China is not doing enough at the moment on two aspects. Firstly, funding and policy support is far from sufficient. Secondly, those that are engaged in AIDS work are often themselves excluded," he said.

High-profile AIDS activists Wan Yanhai and Gao Yaojie have both left China for the United States due to ongoing government pressure.

Campaigner Hu Jia was sentenced to more than three years in prison in 2008 on subversion charges. — AFP

