

Headline	Prejudice Mars China's AIDS Record		
MediaTitle	Asia Wall Street Journal		
Date	01 Dec 2011	Color	Black/white
Section	Opinion	Circulation	80,750
Page No	15	Readership	282,625
Language	English	ArticleSize	149 cm ²
Journalist	N/A	AdValue	RM 14,704
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 44,111



Prejudice Mars China's AIDS Record

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China will observe World AIDS Day on Thursday with events in which Chinese leaders publicly embrace people living with HIV/AIDS. But on every other day of the year, hundreds of thousands of Chinese living with HIV/AIDS are treated as second-class citizens.

Beijing has signed a range of international declarations on HIV/AIDS that denounce discrimination and promote human rights. Yet Chinese citizens can be fired from their jobs and even evicted from their homes on the basis of their HIV status. Many are denied treatment by hospitals, where many ill-informed nurses and doctors fear infection.

Although the new five-year Action AIDS Plan and the 2006 Regulations on AIDS say that people with HIV should have rights, there are no national laws prohibiting discrimination. Indeed, in some provinces it is illegal to hire people with HIV/AIDS for work that involves handling food, or to allow them to use a public swimming pool. Schools are free to openly refuse children whose parents are living with HIV/AIDS.

Compounding the AIDS crisis in China is the lack of any policy to address the 1990s blood disaster, in which for-profit blood donation centers spread the virus in the central plains region. Thousands of people infected with HIV through contaminated blood and blood products as a result have been unable to sue those responsible.

Chinese group Korekata AIDS Law Center, which represents such cases, reports that a growing number of courts are refusing to hear any lawsuits relating to HIV/AIDS. Chinese lawyers who sued employers that discriminate against people living with HIV/AIDS have lost in the courts, which consistently side with the employers.

Institutionalized discrimination drives people living with HIV/AIDS underground, spreads the virus more quickly, and makes many people fearful to even take an HIV test. This makes educating the public and tackling discrimination not only a matter of human rights, but also a public health imperative.

The government could do much more to educate the public about HIV, how it is transmitted and that it can be prevented. A public hearing about how the virus was spread by blood-sellers could lead to greater public understanding and acceptance. China could establish a national fund to compensate the thousands infected with HIV/AIDS through state-run hospitals.

Every country in the world faced the same challenges in the early stages of the epidemic. China has taken great steps forward in acknowledging and beginning to fight HIV/AIDS. But until people living with HIV/AIDS can come out from underground, the epidemic will take many more lives.

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