



Catholic Medical Center in Imphal, India. Photo by Stephen Cunliffe for CRS

“When I came [to CMC in 2005] stigma was very high and no one was willing to touch the [HIV positive] patients. No one was willing to enter [their rooms] or give injections.”

- Dr. H. Diamond Sharma, CMC HIV/AIDS Clinical Consultant and Researcher

“[PLHIV] feel by themselves, they worry what we think of them. I feel we are the same.”

- Ms. Thoinu Devi, CMC Nursing Superintendent and Matron

“Many of the fears [health care professionals] have are not based on facts; information dissemination is one of the biggest methods to overcome stigma.”

- Fr. Francis Kalapurackal, former CMC Director



Reducing stigma among health care providers

Improving HIV treatment and care in North East India

OVERVIEW

There are currently 2.4 million people living with HIV (PLHIV) in India making it the country with the third highest number of PLHIV in the world. Manipur state, located in the North East region of India, has the highest HIV prevalence in the country (1.4%). Despite fighting a more than 22-year epidemic with HIV, stigma often persists among health providers in the state. Many PLHIV continue to identify negative attitudes among providers as a barrier to quality HIV care and treatment.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) supports Project LIFE AID in three cities in high prevalence districts of North East India. Catholic Medical Centre (CMC), a LIFE AID implementing partner in Imphal (Manipur), manages an HIV Unit offering clinical services and counseling to PLHIV. After the Unit's establishment in 2002, CMC administrators struggled to find medical staff willing to work in the Unit because of high levels of stigma among health providers. In response, CMC instituted a staff training program and complementary changes in its management approach to foster greater acceptance of PLHIV in all units of the hospital. As a result, attitudes of the health staff changed, stigma was reduced, and the quality of care improved at CMC.

STEPS IN IMPLEMENTATION

- CMC developed a three-day training module for health workers focused on clinical care and management of HIV. CMC staff adapted training materials from online resources available through the International Training & Education Center on HIV (I-TECH). Topics included: universal precautions for preventing HIV transmission; Post-Exposure Prophylaxis; and the role of nurses in managing opportunistic infections and antiretroviral therapy.
- In 2005 the first training was given to health workers supporting the HIV Unit at CMC. The training was facilitated by Dr. H. Diamond Sharma (CMC HIV/AIDS Clinical Consultant and Researcher) and six other regional technical experts.
- Training has evolved into a quarterly class given by Dr. Diamond which all medical staff is required to attend. The class focuses on reinforcing staff knowledge of HIV, demonstrating practical techniques for maintaining universal precautions, and sharing current issues in HIV care and treatment.



Dr. Diamond examines a patient in the HIV unit of CMC. Steve Cunliffe for CRS



Participants from a health providers training at CMC in 2009. H. Kunjakishore Singh for CRS

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Strong leadership helped establish a culture of acceptance at CMC. Fr. Francis Kalapurackal (former CMC Director) was the initial catalyst for change, recognizing the need for and advocating accepting attitudes among staff as central to the hospital's mission to serve the poor and most vulnerable. Steadfast support from the Nursing Superintendent and Matron, Ms. Thoinu Devi, ensured the new policies were carried out as planned. Dr. Diamond also led by example at CMC, daily demonstrating how to treat PLHIV with compassion while maintaining proper precautions and encouraging other health workers to do the same.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

- Health workers at CMC are no longer hesitant to work in the HIV Unit. To date, no employees that received training have refused to work with PLHIV.
- CMC administrators find that staff prefers working in the HIV Unit because they are confident with the precautions practiced.
- Improvements are observed in the bed-side manner of health providers at CMC. Staff provides comfort to HIV

positive patients and encourages their family members to overcome stigma. Nurses share that learning how to provide emotional support to PLHIV is the most important thing they have gained from CMC's staff training.

SCALING UP

Following success with its own staff, CMC began training health professionals throughout the North East. Since 2007, the training originally developed for CMC staff, has been given to all medical personnel at private health facilities in Manipur, to other LIFE AID implementing partners in the states of Nagaland and Mizoram, and to more than 80 aspiring doctors from medical schools across the region. The training content is tailored to the target audience, such as more detailed clinical aspects of case management being provided to physicians, but always includes visits to CMC's HIV Unit so that participants have an opportunity to interact with PLHIV. CMC has plans to continue and expand this work. The institution is in the process of building its own nursing school and positioning itself to be a regional resource center for training health workers in the North East.

"I am giving advice to new [staff] saying I'm staying here four years, you do not need to be afraid...after they take the class they are not afraid."

- Ms. Karouna Golmei,
CMC Nurse

Partnership

To implement Project LIFE AID, CRS works with Catholic Medical Center in Imphal, Zoram Entu Pawl, Development Association of Nagaland, Nagaland Development Outreach, Don Bosco, Social Awareness Service Organization, Manipur Network of Positive People, Kripa Foundation, Positive Network of Mizoram and Community Awareness and Development Foundation. This four-year project (2008–2012) is funded entirely by CRS.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Prioritizing service to the most vulnerable as an integral part of an institution's mission or goals is a valuable first step towards stigma reduction.
- Commitment from institutional leaders at all levels is essential to establishing a culture of acceptance and support. Physicians in particular can lead by example in their interactions with PLHIV to inspire fellow health workers to provide compassionate care to all patients.
- Correct information about HIV and AIDS, particularly understanding universal precautions for protection against HIV transmission, helps to reduce both fear and stigma among health providers and encourages them to confidently interact with patients.
- Regular reinforcement of concepts through quarterly classes and on-the-job mentoring help employees feel assured and allow them to take the necessary steps to change their behavior.
- Universal precautions by definition are meant to be practiced in all wards and by all medical staff who come into contact with blood and bodily fluids. A separate HIV Unit is not necessary for the practice of comprehensive care and support for PLHIV.

CRS is the international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States. The agency provides assistance to people in more than 100 countries and territories based on need, regardless of race, nationality or creed. CRS has been present in India since 1946. Its national office is located in New Delhi. CRS technical publications are available for free at www.crsprogramquality.org.