

Are we spending too much on HIV?

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Billions of pounds are being spent on the fight against AIDS in developing countries. In this week's BMJ, two experts go head to head over whether we are spending too much.

HIV is receiving relatively too much money, with much of it used inefficiently and sometimes counterproductively, argues Roger England, Chairman of Health Systems Workshop.

Data show that 21% of health aid was allocated to HIV in 2004, up from 8% in 2000. It could now exceed a quarter. Yet HIV constitutes only 5% of the burden of disease in low and middle income countries as measured by disability adjusted life years lost (DALYs). It causes 2.8 million deaths a year worldwide – fewer than the number of stillbirths, and much less than half the number of infant deaths. More deaths are attributable to diabetes than to HIV.

Furthermore, HIV interventions are not cost effective enough to justify this disproportionate spending, he writes. Much HIV money could be spent with more certain benefits on, for example, bed nets, immunisation, or family planning. Money is also wasted in areas that reflect the interests of those on the AIDS industry payroll more than evidence.

He believes that the money could be more effective if used to strengthen public health systems rather than focusing on disease-specific programmes.

AIDS is widely acknowledged as a public health crisis and current spending is woefully inadequate, argue Paul de Lay and colleagues at the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS).

Resources currently pledged are only half of what is needed for a comprehensive response. For instance, in 2006, \$9bn was available for the AIDS response but the real need was estimated at \$15bn. Poor coordination between different stakeholders in affected countries also impedes effective spending. This is compounded by weak institutions and regulatory policies, poor governance, and in some cases corruption.

They argue that the response to AIDS needs to be seen in the context of international commitments to the millennium development goals, which also call for progress across many other developmental priorities. HIV threatens many of these goals, especially those related to poverty and health.

The cost of inaction against AIDS is huge, far greater than for any other public health crisis, they say. Current costs are so high because of the inadequacy of previous investments, but they will be higher tomorrow if we continue to underinvest.

Source: British Medical Journal

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