

UN urges Asia to ditch punitive laws to fight AIDS (Update)

July 1 2013

(AP)—U.N. health officials urged Asian governments Monday to get rid of what they say are punitive laws that hinder the battle against HIV and AIDS by discriminating against high-risk groups and deterring them from seeking treatment.

Steven Kraus, the UNAIDS director for Asia and the Pacific, said laws that punish same-sex activities and impose harsh drug sentences have prompted a rise in transmissions in parts of Asia.

"Punitive laws and practices that discriminate (against) people and prevent them from getting treatment are not helping," Kraus said on the sidelines of the International AIDS Society meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Michel Kazatchkine, the UN's special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, said enforcement against drug addiction, for example, should focus on suppliers, not users.

"It will require political bravery. We need an open debate and to break the taboo," he said.

Cambodia, considered one of Asia's more successful countries in battling HIV and AIDS, has seen annual infections fall from 20,000 in the early 1990s to about 1,300 last year.

Mean Chhi Vun, a senior Cambodian health ministry official, told the

conference in Malaysia that early intervention focused on prevention has slowed transmission, with HIV prevalence among prostitutes plunging from 42 percent in 1996 to 14 percent in 2011.

"There is now no fear or stigma attached to getting treatment, and this has helped us to tremendously bring down new infections," he said.

Among other countries that are taking steps to move away from punitive approaches, Thailand provides condoms for sex workers and Malaysia has converted some drug detention centers into "cure and care" clinics, activists at the conference said.

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Citation: UN urges Asia to ditch punitive laws to fight AIDS (Update) (2013, July 1) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-07-urges-asia-ditch-punitive-laws.html>

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