

10 Pakistani children get HIV from blood transfusions

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Ten Pakistani children have been infected with HIV after receiving tainted blood transfusions, officials said Thursday, in a "shocking" case highlighting the abysmal state of blood screening in the country.

The children, aged five to 16, all suffer from the hereditary blood disorder Thalassaemia, which requires patients to undergo regular transfusions.

Saira Afzal Tarar, Minister of National Health Services Regulation and Coordination, slammed the case as "shocking" and promised an investigation.

"I have sought reports about the incident and I am also writing to the provincial governments about it," she said.

While Pakistan has federal and provincial acts of parliament requiring blood screening, implementation is weak.

"The people responsible should be punished and punished very severely," said Javed Akram, vice-chancellor of the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS).

"Somebody struggled with a lifelong disease and you gave them another lifelong disease," he said.

Akram said the number of children affected was likely to increase as

more Thalassaemia patients are tested for HIV, adding that the infected children would receive free treatment for both HIV and Thalassaemia.

Dr Yasmin Rashid, secretary general of the Thalassaemia Federation of Pakistan, said the ten children were from Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Lahore, but explained that it was hard to pinpoint at this stage which blood banks were responsible for the tainted transfusions.

"All these children go through multiple transfusion centres. If they don't go through one centre they go from another centre."

Rashid said that while some transfusion centres screen for Hepatitis B and C, they do not normally test for HIV.

In response to the incident, the Hussaini Blood Bank in the southern metropolis Karachi has offered the Pakistan Federation of Thalassaemia highly subsidised rates for screening blood samples for HIV, its chief executive officer Asad Ali said.

Ali said the Hussaini Bank alone provides blood transfusions to around 25,000 Thalassaemia patients annually. The PIMS vice-chancellor said that the nationwide figure is much higher, including thousands of children.

Thalassaemia prevents the production of haemoglobin and affects an estimated 50,000 people in Pakistan.

Pakistan is considered a low prevalence country for HIV, with UNAIDS estimating that less than 0.05 percent of the general population carries the disease.

But the disease is expanding among intravenous drug users, sex workers and migrant labourers returning from the Gulf.

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