Filling the knowledge gap: Measuring HIV prevalence and risk factors among populations most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS in Libya

Joseph Valadez1, Sima Berendes1, Caroline Jeffrey1, Joanna Thomson2, Hussain Ben Othman3, Sarah Moxon1, Leon Danon3, Abdullah A. Turki1, Rabia Safiiläden1 and Lusine Mirzoyan1.

1Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, UK 2Mathematics Institute, University of Warwick, UK 3National Centre for Diseases Control, National AIDS Programme, Tripoli, Libya.

INTRODUCTION

Libya had one of the world’s largest nosocomial HIV-outbreaks in the 1990s leading to the detention of six foreign medical workers. They were released in 2007 after the Libyan Government and the European Union agreed to humanitarian cooperation that included the development of Libya’s first National HIV-Strategy and the research reported here. Given the absence of sound evidence on the status and dynamics of Libya’s HIV-epidemic, we aimed to assess HIV-prevalence and related risk factors among populations most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

METHODS

Using respondent-driven sampling (RDS), we conducted a cross-sectional survey among 328 people who inject drugs (PWID), 227 men having sex with men (MSM), and 69 female sex workers (FSW) in Tripoli. (Unfortunately, FSW target sample size was not reached, the study was interrupted by political turmoil in February 2011). We collected behavioural data and blood samples for HIV, hepatitis C and B testing.

All participants had to belong to the specific risk group, be at least 15 years old, have a valid referral coupon and be able to provide informed consent prior to enrolment.

RESULTS

We estimated an HIV-prevalence of 87% among PWID, 3% among MSM, and 16% among FSW. We detected high levels of IDU-related, and sexual risk factors, in the context of strong stigma and lack of prevention programmes. Of particular concern, 85% of PWID reported having shared needles, only 21% of MSM used a condom at last sex, and 28% of FSW experienced STI symptoms during the last year. Over a third of MSM have risky sex with men and women and nearly a third of FSW report having 50 or more sexual partners.

CONCLUSIONS

In this first bio-behavioural survey in Libya we detected among PWID one of the highest (or even the highest) levels of HIV-infection worldwide in the absence of a comprehensive harm-reduction programme. Prevalence of HIV in FSW suggests potential for a concentrated epidemic and there is evidence of bridging between MSM and heterosexual population. There is urgent need to implement an effective National HIV-Strategy informed by the results of this research, taking into account Libya’s unique context and high-risk sexual and drug-using networks. The risk of further transmission within different risk groups and to the general population is particularly high given the recent military events that led to increased violence, migration, and the disruption of essential HIV-related services and structures.

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CONTACT: J.valadez@liverpool.ac.uk

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