

2024 Policy Address Submission

INVEST TO END HIV/AIDS AND SAVE LIVES

Executive Summary

1. In late 2021, the Hong Kong Advisory Council on AIDS (ACA)¹ released the *Recommended HIV/AIDS Strategies for Hong Kong (2022-2027)* (Recommend Strategies). It called for more coordinated efforts among stakeholders to achieve “the goal of ending AIDS as a public health threat in Hong Kong by 2030.”²
2. The number of new HIV infection cases has been on a downward trajectory since 2015, but the rate of decline has slowed down. Also, heterosexual transmission continued to account for a significant percentage of new cases. Overall, the situation suggests that much work remains to be done if we are to meet the goal of ending HIV/AIDS by 2030.
3. The government supports the combination approach to HIV prevention, which is widely recognized as an effective intervention. However, we are concerned that, due to funding and policy constraints, as well as an aversion to certain trauma-informed approaches,³ combination prevention has not been used to its full potential to stop the spread of HIV.
4. Sexual health is of fundamental importance for both individual well-being and societal development. To that end, Hong Kong should support comprehensive sexuality education so that young people have accurate and scientific information about sexuality. This allows them to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives.
5. As Hong Kong strives to become a smart city, the government should support and guide health service providers and other stakeholders to fully utilize telemedicine.

End HIV/AIDS by 2030

6. The first case of HIV infection was reported in Hong Kong in 1984. With advances in science and medicine, HIV is now a manageable chronic condition, and the number of

¹ Formed in 1990, the Hong Kong Advisory Council on AIDS is a permanent non-statutory body appointed by the government to advise on AIDS policies in Hong Kong. The Director of Health is the vice-chairperson, and members include healthcare professionals, academics and representatives from several government agencies.

² “Recommended HIV/AIDS Strategies for Hong Kong 2022-2027.” Hong Kong Advisory Council on AIDS, November 2022, p. 11.

³ Harm reduction is not new in Hong Kong. The Department of Health runs methadone clinics and acknowledges that the “implementation of harm reduction strategy will not increase the number of substance users and can effectively control the spread of HIV.” See: “Virtual AIDS Office - Government Programmes on AIDS > Harm Reduction on Substance Use,” <https://www.aids.gov.hk/english/hivprehealth/methadone.html>; Also, the *HIV Manual* stated that “harm reduction strategies are an important component in the menu of management options for gay men who practise chemsex,” See: “HIV Manual 4th edition.” Department of Health, 2019. <https://hivmanual.hk>.

reports of HIV infection has been decreasing for almost nine consecutive years from the peak of over 700 cases in 2015. Yet, the rate of decline has moderated considerably. At AIDS Concern, we have seen an increasing number of cases involving late presenters, i.e. HIV-infected patients with CD4 cell count <200 cells/ μ l. This situation was noted in a government press release: “The number of AIDS cases has escalated from 62 cases in 2022 to 101 cases in 2023, among which over 80 per cent of AIDS patients progressed to AIDS after being diagnosed with HIV infection within three months. This indicates that the majority of people with HIV have not undergone HIV antibody testing early.”⁴

7. Although medical advancements help save lives, stigma against people living with HIV (PLHIV) persists, significantly impacting their mental health. Myths about HIV can dissuade people from getting tested. As a result, the government must reconsider its strategy for normalizing HIV testing. In this way, we can eliminate the stigma associated with HIV testing and enable the early discovery of HIV-positive persons. As a result, those infected with HIV will be able to obtain early treatment, and new transmission chains will be cut, helping us reach the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets.⁵
8. Mental health care support and access to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) are two of the ten priority actions identified by the ACA. As of the time of writing, there is still no word on PrEP accessibility. The lack of any action plan for PrEP/PEP is not ideal and may hinder our ability to achieve the goal of ending HIV/AIDS by 2030.
9. Mainland China has taken a proactive stance on PrEP and PEP. Aside from the issuance of technical guidelines for the full implementation of PEP,⁶ Han Mengjie, Director of the China CDC’s National Center for AIDS/STD Control and Prevention, remarked at the 25th International AIDS Conference that “it is China’s national policy to implement PrEP and PEP all over the country.”⁷
10. Health authorities around the world agree that PrEP is highly effective in preventing HIV. In light of recent developments in mainland China, we urge the government to implement a framework for Hong Kong based on the most recent World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines to make the best use of PrEP and PEP in HIV prevention.
11. WHO defines combination HIV prevention as “rights-based, evidence-informed and community-owned programmes that use a mix of biomedical, behavioural and structural interventions, prioritized to meet the HIV prevention needs of individuals and communities,

⁴ “CHP Reviews Local HIV/AIDS Situation in 2023,”

<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202403/05/P2024030500266.htm>.

⁵ The “95-95-95” targets are set by UNAIDS in its global AIDS strategy. They mean aiming for 95% of people who are living with HIV to know their HIV status, 95% of people who know that they are living with HIV to be on lifesaving antiretroviral treatment and 95% of people who are on treatment to be virally suppressed. These targets have been adopted by ACA in Hong Kong.

⁶ Xu, Jun-Jie, Meng-Jie Han, Yong-Jun Jiang, Hai-Bo Ding, Xi Li, Xiao-Xu Han, Fan Lv, et al. “Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS in China: Lessons from the Past Three Decades.” *Chinese Medical Journal* 134, no. 23 (November 10, 2021): 2799–2809. <https://doi.org/10.1097/cm9.0000000000001842>.

⁷ “Live session - CMVirtualPortal,”

https://aids2024.iasociety.org/cmVirtualPortal/_iasociety/aids2024/session/0000038880/12460e0ae60d737b7a761a1e16ee8dd0b1d53893/0000000040.

to have the greatest sustained impact on reducing new infections.”⁸ The Recommended Strategies endorsed this approach, and adequate resources must be provided to maximize the benefits of combination HIV prevention.

Develop Holistic Healthcare in the Smart Era

12. PLHIV are more likely to develop mood, anxiety and cognitive disorders, and stigma and discrimination are known to impact their mental health negatively. As a result, we recommend that the government collaborate closely with community groups to increase anti-stigma education efforts and ensure that PLHIV receives timely mental health support.
13. We urge the government to fully utilize telemedicine in combatting HIV. Researchers found that “telehealth holds transformative potential for healthcare in Africa, especially in underprivileged regions, presenting a decisive tool for attaining the UNAIDS 95-95-95 goals by 2030, and for ensuring a sustainable HIV care during a post UNAIDS targets era. By harnessing digital innovations, telehealth is poised to bridge healthcare disparities, tackle specific health issues and boost access to high-quality care.”⁹
14. While the situation in Hong Kong differs from that in Africa, we must not overlook the potential of telemedicine to help us attain the 95-95-95 goals by 2030. To do so, we can take reference from the WHO’s “Framework for the Implementation of a Telemedicine Service”, and come up with a robust framework that works for us. As Hong Kong strives to become a smart city, the government can offer more support and guidance on how to implement telemedicine. Our current situation is far from ideal and holds us back.

Promote Sexual Health through Comprehensive Sexuality Education

15. WHO defines sexual health as “a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.”¹⁰ This definition guides us in the provision of our services. We implore the government to adhere to this definition when formulating policies and delivering services related to sexual health and sexuality education.
16. Currently, Hong Kong schools implement sex education through key learning areas and subjects. We recommend the government to review this approach and implement a comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programme. In particular, we urge the government to take reference from the *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*,¹¹ jointly published by UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNWOMEN

⁸ “Prevention,” August 19, 2024, <https://www.who.int/teams/global-hiv-hepatitis-and-stis-programmes/hiv/prevention>.

⁹ Diego F. Cuadros et al., “Unlocking the Potential of Telehealth in Africa for HIV: Opportunities, Challenges, and Pathways to Equitable Healthcare Delivery,” *Frontiers in Digital Health* 6 (March 4, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fgth.2024.1278223>.

¹⁰ “Sexual Health,” August 27, 2024. [https://www.who.int/teams/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-research-\(srh\)/areas-of-work/sexual-health](https://www.who.int/teams/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-research-(srh)/areas-of-work/sexual-health).

¹¹ “International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. An Evidence-informed Approach,” August 19, 2024,

and WHO, when updating the sexuality education curriculum and/or designing a CSE programme for Hong Kong.

17. According to WHO, “there is clear evidence that abstinence-only programmes – which instruct young people to not have sex outside of marriage – are ineffective in preventing early sexual activity and risk-taking behaviour, and potentially harmful to young people’s sexual and reproductive health.”¹² Therefore, we encourage the government to approach sexuality education from a public health perspective. This is critical because CSE should be founded on solid evidence-based research and scientific information. Furthermore, a strong CSE programme will have long-term positive effects on both individuals and society, echoing the principle that “sexual health is fundamental to the overall health and well-being of individuals, couples and families, and to the social and economic development of communities and countries.”¹³

Concluding Remarks

18. We are racing against the clock to achieve the goal of ending HIV/AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. Thus, AIDS Concern urges the government to provide adequate resources and collaborate more closely with community groups to deliver HIV prevention programmes in line with the principles of combination prevention.
19. AIDS Concern recommends that the government normalize HIV testing so that HIV-positive cases can be identified early and those infected with HIV can obtain treatment early, thus making the most of the “treatment as prevention” strategy.
20. AIDS Concern suggests that the government work with community groups to create an affordable and accessible PrEP/PEP programme. Such a programme can be fully or partially funded.
21. AIDS Concern’s recommendations aim to achieve several objectives, including: i) ending HIV/AIDS by 2030, ii) developing holistic or comprehensive healthcare in line with the government’s Primary Healthcare Blueprint, iii) promoting smart healthcare, iv) promoting sexual health in accordance with the WHO definition and v) fostering an inclusive community.
22. AIDS Concern commends the government for implementing numerous health-related initiatives, such as District Health Centre and the establishment of The Commons. We look forward to working closely with the government to make Hong Kong a healthier city.

<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/9789231002595>.

¹² “Comprehensive Sexuality Education,” August 19, 2024, <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/comprehensive-sexuality-education>.

¹³ World Health Organization, “Sexual Health,” August 27, 2019, https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_1.