

Experts say Estonia has made good progress in preventing HIV but needs to promote both prevention and care

Note for the press

Tallinn, 29 April 2008

Estonia has experienced a strong increase in the number of people living with HIV since 2000 and has responded by launching various policy initiatives at the community and national levels. The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have comprehensively evaluated the current situation, the effects of the response, areas for improvement and further priorities.

The evaluation report - *Evaluation of fighting HIV/AIDS in Estonia* - highlights the positive trends in fighting HIV, especially the decline in reported new cases among men since a national HIV prevention strategy was implemented. This is the result of increased coordination of activities, increased financial resources allocated and continual monitoring of the results to guide the strategy. Nevertheless, policy-makers and implementers need to focus further attention on several areas.

“Estonia is one of the countries where we have had good collaboration for many years, and various initiatives from prevention to treatment are ongoing. Although this evaluation has identified many areas for improvement, it clearly shows measurable successes,” says Srdan Matic of the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

The report notes that, although the current HIV strategy has correctly given priority to injecting drug users, prevention services, such as needle and syringe exchange and opioid substitution therapy, should be further expanded and be accessible in all settings, including prisons. As many injecting drug users spend time in prisons and detention houses, any lack of

services in these settings could risk undermining the benefits obtained from delivering HIV prevention services in the community. Another significant challenge identified was that people's HIV status is recognized late and they thus access services late. Despite increased efforts in past years, recent statistics show that HIV remains a major public health challenge in Estonia.

“We are very committed to responding in an evidence-based and strategic manner to the current situation and to providing the necessary prevention and care. This is clearly a fight requiring relentless efforts in the years to come,” says Maret Maripuu, Estonia's Minister of Social Affairs.

In addition to national funding, Estonia has benefited from international donor support, especially from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria until 2007. From January 2007 until 2010, the UNODC project on HIV prevention and care among injecting drug users and in prison settings in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is providing technical assistance.

A press conference will be held on the occasion of the launch of the report *Evaluation of fighting HIV/AIDS in Estonia* on 29 April 2008 in Tallinn. Estonia's Ministry of Social Affairs and National Institute for Health Development requested the evaluation, and the WHO Regional Office for Europe and UNODC carried it out.

The media are invited to attend the press conference from 13:00 to 13:30 at the Reval Hotel Olümpia (meeting room Epsilon) in Tallinn. Journalists who wish to attend the press conference or interview the presenters should register with or contact Helen Noormets of the National Institute for Health Development (details below).



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