

Reuters New Media

Health officials tell Greece to act fast to control HIV

<p>Kate Kelland</p>

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* AIDS virus will spread without concerted action

* Greek's severe financial crisis hampering efforts

* ECDC warns costs of inaction will be far higher

London, November 30 (Reuters) - A spiralling outbreak of HIV in debt-stricken Greece could run out of control unless urgent action is taken, European health officials said on Friday.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) said infections with the AIDS-causing virus among drug users and other high-risk groups were rising fast, and that a failure to act would mean far higher costs in future.

ECDC director Marc Sprenger was in Athens on Friday visiting hospitals and needle exchanges. He said he would tell officials that free syringes and methadone programmes must be stepped up, and testing and treatment for the human immunodeficiency virus made available to all.

"Immediate concerted action is needed in order to curb and eventually stop the current outbreak," he told Reuters as the ECDC published a report on Greece's HIV problem.

Since 2009, recession in Greece has reduced economic output by a fifth and sent unemployment to a record high.

The healthcare system is under extreme pressure, making it harder for the poor, unemployed or homeless to get treatment.

The ECDC said it was unclear how much Greece's debt crisis is contributing to the HIV outbreak, but it was evidently having "a significant social and health impact". There were fears in Athens that "HIV treatment services have reached a ceiling" because of a leap in case numbers in 2012.

While Greece has only 7.4 HIV infections per 100,000 people, compared to 10 per 100,000 in Britain or 27.3 in Estonia, rates have soared since 2011 in high-risk groups such as drug users.

From 2007 to 2010, there were only 10 to 15 cases a year of HIV infection in injecting drug users.

But during 2011, there were 256 such cases - or 27 percent of the total. Another 314 drug use HIV cases were reported between January and August 2012, bringing the total HIV cases for the year to August to 768.

Combination drugs can give patients with HIV near-normal life expectancy, but the drugs must be taken for life, and cost 10,000 to 22,000 euros (\$13,000 to \$28,500) a year.

"If a scale-up (in prevention and testing) is not achieved, it's likely that HIV transmission among people who inject drugs in Athens will continue and even accelerate - and could eventually spread," Sprenger said.

"The cost of prevention ... will be significantly less than the provision of treatment to those who become infected."

The ECDC said waiting times for methadone programmes in Athens were more than seven years in August 2010, and only around seven syringes a year were given to each drug user.

Efforts by authorities to address this have now brought waiting lists down below four years and increased the number of syringes to 15 a year in 2011 and an expected 45 in 2012, but this is well below the international standard of 200 needles.

Rates of other health problems such as depression and suicide have been rising in Greece, which is also battling the re-emergence of mosquito-borne diseases such West Nile Virus and malaria. (\$1 = 0.7746 euros)

(Reporting by Kate Kelland; Editing by Kevin Liffey)

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