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Thailand: HIV infection rate on rise among gay men

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World Aids Day yesterday was greeted with concern by health officials over the rising number of infections among men who have sex with men (MSM).

The HIV infection rate among MSMs has increased 11% between 1987 and 2011 and is continuing to rise, Narong Sahamethapat, permanent secretary for public health, said Saturday.

He warned HIV-positive people in the MSM group also have a high risk of anal cancer.

"A low level of CD4 [a type of immune cell which is targeted by the HIV virus] in some HIV-positive people will make it more easier for cancer cells to develop," Dr Narong said.

The Thai Red Cross tracked 174 MSM cases from Jan 2007 to April 2008 and found 118 men, or 67.8% contracted HIV. Forty per cent of those infected with HIV had also contracted the human papilloma virus, which is associated with anal cancer.

According to the Public Health Ministry, Thailand records about 9,470 new cases of HIV infections a year, with 80% contracting the virus from having unsafe sex.

The ministry has recorded a total of 464,414 people living with HIV/Aids.

The ministry has set a "zero new infection" target and plans to cut cases of discrimination against people living with HIV/Aids by 50% under a five-year plan ending in 2016.

Dozens of HIV/Aids patients and health activists gathered at Mor Chit bus terminal yesterday to call for an end to discrimination against people living with HIV/Aids. They demanded access to education and career paths like others.

Supatra Nacapew, director of the Foundation for Aids Rights, said the Thai public has a better understanding about HIV/Aids, but discrimination against HIV-positive people shows no sign of decreasing.

The network recently conducted a survey on 233 HIV-positive people and found that 47% of them

experienced basic rights violations in various forms and 26.18% said they had been refused jobs because of their condition.

"Most people have a better understanding about the disease, but they are still very worried about it. That is why we still see many cases of discrimination against HIV-positive people," Ms Supatra said.

"People living with HIV/Aids have the right to study or work like ordinary people."

Ms Supatra cited the example of a third-year nursing student who was reportedly asked by her university to quit after a blood result showed she was HIV-positive.

In Nakhon Sawan province, a kindergarten schoolboy was told to leave school after the school management found that he was HIV-positive, she said.

Discrimination must be eradicated otherwise these people will have to rely on government services forever because they cannot take care of themselves, she noted.

Apiwat Kangkaew, a coordinator of the Thai Network of People Living with HIV/Aids, demanded the government ban blood tests in job recruitment.

Educational institutions also must not use the disease as a reason to discriminate and keep people from learning, he said.

[See the topic on aegis.org](http://aegis.org)