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Six young adults diagnosed with HIV last year

by Elaine Attard

Six out of 19 persons who were diagnosed with HIV last year were young adults aged between 20 and 24.

This transpired during the Health Department's launch of a new EU-wide project, which will be educating young people and young adults on the prevention of HIV, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C.

"Young people are the most vulnerable to contract these three infections. These figures highlight the need for such a nationwide project in Malta," said the director general of the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Unit, Charmaine Gauci.

The European Commission will finance the project called H-Cube, denoting the three sexually transmitted infections, which will last 30 months.

11 EU states, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Italy will be taking part in the project, which will target young people aged between 15 and 24.

H-Cube will be a positive campaign based on the good practices used by each of the participating countries, which will be adapted to the different realities in each country. The project will keep in mind the cultural, social, economic and political diversity of the participating countries.

According to Parliamentary Assistant Peter Micallef, HIV and AIDS cases are increasing at an alarming rate in East Europe and it is even more alarming that 30 to 50 per cent of infected people are not aware of their condition.

The campaign will aim to reach young people in places where they live, work, learn or relax. A new website will be the main tool to promote a healthy sexual lifestyle. The website will include a questionnaire, information about sexually transmitted infections and other information which will be updated regularly. Following the returned questionnaires the health authorities would be able to adapt the campaign to the situation reflected by the questionnaires. An important part of the H-Cube campaign is that the e-learning tools available on the website will be available for teachers, parents and other professionals involved in the social and health sector.

The Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate will oversee the project. The current local situation with regard to STIs among young people has already been assessed in preparation for the campaign. Also, three information leaflets, one on the prevention of each STI, aimed at a young audience, were published. An outreach programme has been designed with the medical students' association which will meet young people and discuss how they can prevent STI contraction.

Sedqa, the agency for substance abuse, will also be contributing by creating awareness among drug users who use needles to inject themselves with drugs. The aim is to reduce the risks in that cohort by encouraging the young people to avoid sharing needles. At least 60 per cent of drug users use needles to inject drugs. A Sedqa spokesperson pointed out that free needles are distributed from health centres. "The price of a needle is incomparable with the price of treatment required to cure someone with hepatitis," added the spokesperson.

Hepatitis B and C can be contracted via drug-injecting needles, sharing equipment to snort cocaine, using non-sterilised tattooing, body piercing or acupuncture equipment, exposure to blood during unprotected sex with an infected person, or through an infected mother to her baby during childbirth.

HIV can be contracted through unprotected sexual intercourse with an infected person, contact with an infected person's blood, use of infected blood products, sharing of injecting needles, and from mother to child during pregnancy, delivery and breast feeding.

Information is the best weapon against diseases, said Dr Micallef, and he hopes that this project will help increase awareness among young people and encourage them to live a healthy lifestyle.

Hepatitis B / Hepatitis C

• One of every 12 persons worldwide suffers from Hepatitis B or C.

• In 2007 there were 6,500 new Hepatitis B cases and 30,000 new Hepatitis C cases.

• The ECDC estimates that two million people were infected with Hepatitis B while around 350 million live with chronic Hepatitis B.

• The ECDC estimates that around 170 million contracted Hepatitis C while some 130 million live with chronic Hepatitis C.

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• Young people are the cohort which is most at risk of contracting Hepatitis B or C.

HIV / AIDS

• Around two million people are living with HIV or AIDS.

• The prevalence rate for HIV/AIDS varies from 0.1 per cent to 1.2 per cent.

• In 2007 there were 50,000 new HIV cases in the EU.

• Estimates show that 30 to 50 per cent of people infected with HIV in Europe are not aware of their condition.

• In Malta19 persons were diagnosed with HIV last year. Their ages varied.

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Press Conference to promote H-Cube with the Maltese Minister of Health and in the presence of journalists.