COVID-19 Puts People With HIV in China at Risk of Med Shortages

The outbreak of new coronavirus is having a “major impact” on their lives, and many are “very panicked.”

February 20, 2020 By Trent Straube

People living with HIV in China report that the outbreak of COVID-19, the new coronavirus, is having a “major impact” on their lives, according to a survey conducted by a United Nations AIDS group.

Notably, people are concerned that they’ll run out of their HIV meds because of the lockdowns in cities. For example, some people who had traveled from their hometowns have been unable to return.

According to a press release from the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), key findings from the survey of HIV-positive respondents in China show:

- 32.6% were at risk of running out of HIV meds because of lockdowns and restrictions of movement;
- 48.6% reported that they didn’t know where they’d get their next refill of HIV meds;
- 90% want more details about protective measures specific to people with HIV;
- 82% said they have enough information to assess their own risk and to take measures to prevent contracting COVID-19;
- Nearly 33% reported feeling anxious and needing psychosocial support during the outbreak;

- More than 60% said they didn't have enough protective items, such as face masks and disinfectant.

"People living with HIV must continue to get the HIV medicines they need to keep them alive," said Winnie Byanyima, UNAIDS executive director, in the press release. "We must ensure that everyone who needs HIV treatment gets it, no matter where they are."

UNAIDS China Country Office is working with local HIV groups to reach people who need support. In addition, the Chinese National Center for AIDS/STD Control and Prevention is coordinating with local authorities to ensure people can get their medications.

The survey included more than 1,000 people and was spearheaded by UNAIDS and the BaiHuaLin alliance of people living with HIV.

Complicating the situation is the fact that China's health officials said they were treating COVID-19 cases with the HIV drug Kaletra, which contains lopinavir and ritonavir. Manufactured by AbbVie, Kaletra is also sold as the generic drug Aluvia.

As Reuters reports, HIV-negative people have been asking those who have HIV to share their meds as a potential treatment against COVID-19.

"(Patients are) very panicked, very panicked," said an anonymous HIV-positive volunteer who runs a group chat of over 100 people, most of whom live in Huibei province, the epicenter of the outbreak. "I have to comfort them constantly," the volunteer told Reuters. "For patients, medicine is important, treatment is important. This could be as important as front-line relief supplies."

In related POZ news read "Was the New Coronavirus Created in a Lab Using HIV Genes? In a Word: No. But Here's the Story Behind that Conspiracy Theory."

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