Reforms in Mexico Could Endanger Thousands Living With HIV

The country's new administration is changing the way it buys medicines and funds clinics.

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People living with HIV in Mexico are worried about drug shortages as the government overhauls the way it buys medicines in bulk and funds HIV-related organizations that provide treatment and prevention.

Reuters reports that the new administration, which assumed power in December, announced that it was switching up its system for procuring meds as a way to save money and fight corruption. Previously, Censida (National Center for Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS—which provides universal access to treatment—purchased all the antiretrovirals provided by Mexico's Seguro Popular public health insurance program. Now, the centralized Finance Ministry will handle all drug purchases.

In addition, the administration is ending funding for nongovernmental organizations—local community groups that provide HIV treatment and prevention services.

Though the government says it has enough meds in stock for a smooth transition, AIDS advocates are concerned about shortages. Censida has already advised its workers to dispense treatments for one month instead of the usual three months.

About 220,000 people are living with HIV in Mexico, according to United Nations data cited in the Reuters article, but, as of 2016, only 60 percent were taking HIV meds. What's more, the Mexican government reports that although HIV rates dropped about 15 percent between 2005 and 2016, the country still sees about 12,000 new HIV diagnoses each year.

Gay men and transgender people in Mexico face a high HIV prevalence—more than 17 percent. The second highest prevalence is among sex workers, at 7 percent.

Advocates say these population groups often fear discrimination from governmental groups and therefore seek meds and HIV prevention services from nongovernmental groups. That's one reason why switching control of the HIV medical supply and prevention efforts into the hands of the government could be problematic.

Censida officials tell Reuters that advocates' fears are unfounded because there is no plan for the government agencies to replace organizations in civil society and that the disruption in funding for these groups is only temporary.

The concern is that people with HIV will be left without the meds for periods of time while government reforms and transitions are being worked out. When people miss doses, especially for periods of time, the virus can become detectable and mutate. This not only harms their health but also renders them able to transmit the virus to others.

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