

Why not set up HIV testing centre in each district: SC asks Centre

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NEW DELHI: With HIV testing and treatment coverage remained at meagre 36 per cent in the country, leaving majority of the HIV-infected population undetected and untreated, the Supreme Court on Friday agreed to hear a plea for setting up medical centres across the country particularly in rural areas, exclusively to provide treatment to people suffering from the deadly virus.

India has third-highest number of people living with HIV in the world with 21.17 lakh infected from the deadly virus. Although HIV epidemic in the country is slowing down, with a 19% decline in new HIV infections (130,000 in 2013), and a 38% decline in AIDS-related deaths between 2005 and 2013, the proportion of people who do not have access to antiretroviral therapy treatment is still very high at around 64 per cent.

Agreeing to hear a PIL on for setting up hospitals exclusively for treatment of HIV infected patients, a bench of Justices J S Khehar and C Nagappan issued notice to Centre seeking it's response on providing testing facilities in each districts to ensure that people affected from the virus are detected on time and proper medical treatment is provided to them.

The court passed the order on a petition filed by senior advocate Paramananda Katara who contended that every HIV infected must be provided antiretroviral therapy at affordable price immediately after the diagnosis to stop the deadly virus from multiplying. At the end of 2013, only 7 lakh people were on antiretroviral therapy, the second largest number of people on treatment in any single country.

"Helpless patients suffering with HIV/AIDS are dying in states and Union Territories all over the country as there are no exclusive hospitals to deal with this epidemic disease. There are no HIV testing centre in rural areas and it leads to spread of the virus. It is a fundamental duty of the Centre and state governments to provide immediate medical treatment to HIV/AIDS patients," he told the bench.

Contending that prisoners and sex workers are more prone to being affected by the virus, the petitioner contended that testing centres must be set up in jail premises and red light areas.

HIV prevalence in the country is an estimated at 0.3%. This figure is small compared to most other middle-income countries in teh world but because of huge population this equates to more than 21 lakh people living with HIV and around 1.3 lakh people died from AIDS-related illnesses in 2013.

The Centre has recently ramped up the national AIDS control programme with an additional investment of over Rs 300 crore to provide third-line treatment for over one lakh patients, increasing the benchmark for those eligible for free anti-retroviral therapy (ART) as well as ensuring more supplies of contraceptives.

This assumes significance as the AIDS control programme, which was on the verge of maturing from receiving international funding, suffered a huge cut in budgetary allocation last year. This led to shortage of condoms, medicines and testing kits across the country. However, this year's budget has proposed an allocation of Rs 1615 crore for the programme, as compared to Rs 1300 crore in 2015-16