

The Social Context of the Emergence of HIV in Thailand

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At a global level there are considerable differences between regions in the levels of prevalence, and rate of transmission, of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Furthermore there are differences between regions in the social and demographic characteristics of HIV carriers/AIDS sufferers (e.g. heterosexuals, homosexuals, injecting drug users, infants). It is notable that Asia has generally lagged behind other regions in the spread of HIV. However recently Thailand has acknowledged rapidly increasing levels of infection. This paper is structured in terms of three broad sections. (1) An outline of some basic epidemiological principles concerning the transmission of HIV which help account for the regional variations in prevalence; (2) A description of the emerging awareness of HIV as a public health problem within Thailand; (3) A review of the social characteristics of HIV carriers in Thailand, interpreted by reference to the wider social context, chiefly in terms of : international tourism, the commercial sex industry/sexual lifestyles and injecting drug dependency. The paper highlights the importance of considering the particular social and historical factors which shape and sustain the transmission of HIV within a particular country.