People with HIV in China are routinely denied medical treatment

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People in China infected with HIV face severe discrimination in the healthcare system, including denial of treatment for conditions not related to HIV, finds research conducted by the International Labour Organization’s Office for China and Mongolia. It also says that healthcare workers face stigma and inadequate protection when treating patients with the infection.

At the same time a non-governmental organisation, the China Alliance of People Living with HIV/AIDS (CAP+), has released a report recommending changes to tackle poor access to healthcare that people with HIV in China face.

The International Labour Organization’s study, done in collaboration with the Chinese National Centre for AIDS/STD Prevention and Control and Marie Stopes International, involved a survey of 103 people with HIV and 23 healthcare workers. People with HIV reported routine denial of access to treatment; treatment that differed from that given to people with similar conditions but who didn’t have HIV or AIDS; mandatory testing for HIV; and inappropriate disclosure of their HIV status.

One of the main obstacles to equitable treatment is the designation of specific hospitals specialising in infectious disease to treat patients with HIV. The designation applies to provision of antiretrovirals but is being deliberately misinterpreted by general hospitals to deny people with HIV access to treatment there, referring patients instead to the designated hospitals, critics say.

“The existence of designated infectious disease hospitals becomes a convenient excuse for general hospitals to turn sufferers away,” said Meng Lin, coordinator of the secretariat of CAP+, speaking at a press conference to release the reports in Beijing. “The refusal of access to medical treatment for people living with HIV doesn’t only occur for complex surgical procedures, it also occurs for a number of relatively simple problems such as haemorrhoids, cleaning and stitching of external wounds, and fractures.”

Rulian Wu, the International Labour Organization’s national programme coordinator in Beijing on HIV/AIDS and the world of work, said, “Particularly in smaller cities, people living with HIV complained that they can’t find a place to get surgery. Hospital managers are worried about the hospital getting a bad reputation and scaring away other patients.

“Healthcare workers are also very vulnerable. Standard precautions are not well implemented, and there is a lack of personal protective equipment. If healthcare workers are infected with HIV in the workplace they cannot get any compensation, because HIV is not considered to be an occupational disease.”

The International Labour Organization has called on the Chinese government to promote better awareness among healthcare workers of the rights of people living with HIV and to clarify existing policy on treating people with HIV.

However, CAP+ wants to see the specific designation of hospitals for HIV treatment abolished. Mr Meng said, “I have been to more than 10 countries where I’ve found that people with HIV go to see doctors as ordinary patients. There is no such thing as ‘HIV/AIDS designated’ hospitals like in China.”

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