

The epidemiological situation of HIV/AIDS in Albania

Dr. Lumturi MERKURI

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA, ALBANIA

Dr. Marjeta DERVISHI

INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC HEALTH, TIRANA, ALBANIA

Abstract

Introduction

HIV infection continues to be a global public health problem, despite advances in HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care. Data from the UNAIDS report, 2020, estimates that in 2019, globally 38 million people were living with HIV and 690,000 people died of AIDS. The European HIV/AIDS Surveillance, 2019, shows that the number of new HIV cases has increased and HIV infection remains a problem in the European region as well. Epidemiological data of the Institute of Public Health, in Albania 2019, report 1298 cases of HIV infection with an increasing trend of cases.

Purpose

Analysis and assessment of the epidemiological situation of HIV / AIDS in Albania, for the cumulative period, 1993 - November 2019.

Method

Presentation and analysis of cumulative national data (1993- November 2019) of HIV positive cases, provided in different populations: clinic suspects, blood

donors, volunteers with HIV risk behaviors, HIV vulnerable groups, persons transfused, pregnant women and persons seeking testing for the visa application / documents.

Results

HIV/AIDS cases by 2019, were 1298, with low prevalence of HIV infection in the general population (0.046%). In 2019 (until November 2019), the number of HIV cases is 93. Most of the total cases are from urban areas (72.6%). The sexual route of transmission is reported in 95% of cases, while vertical transmission, from infected mother to child is 2.8% of the total (36 cases). HIV is more prevalent in males (72%), with an increased trend of cases diagnosed in males having sex with males / MSM. The distribution of HIV positive cases by age group shows that the age group 35-44 years (29.8%) predominates, while children 0-15 years presents 3.5% of the cases. The total number of HIV-positive children is 45.

Conclusions and recommendations

Although with an increasing trend of diagnosed cases, Albania remains a country with a low prevalence of HIV infection. HIV infection still remains an urban phenomenon, with a predominance of the sexual route of transmission. The most affected group by HIV / AIDS is 25-45 years old, although it is present at all ages. The stigma of discrimination against HIV-positive people remains one of the main barriers to HIV testing and for the low number of voluntary tests. Careful monitoring of HIV / AIDS, and strengthening of HIV prevention programs is needed, especially in key high-risk populations. Intensifying work to continuously inform the population about HIV / AIDS, promoting routine examinations and promoting voluntary testing, should be basic strategies for HIV prevention.

Keywords: HIV / AIDS, epidemiology, HIV positive, prevalence, voluntary testing

INTRODUCTION

HIV continues to be one of the leading global public health problems. However, with increasing access to HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care, HIV infection has become a chronic health condition, enabling people living with HIV to live long and healthy lives¹.

From the data of the 2020 UNAIDS report on the global AIDS epidemic, it is estimated that in 2019 globally: 38 million people were living with HIV; 1.7 million

people became infected with HIV; 690,000 people died of AIDS. Also, since the beginning of the epidemic, about 75.7 million people have been infected with HIV and 32.7 million people have died of AIDS, and according to projections, AIDS will continue to be one of the leading causes of premature death in the coming decades².

Results from the European HIV/AIDS Survey, 2019, showed that the number of new HIV cases has increased by 19% in the last decade, and that HIV infection remains a major health problem also in the European region³.

In the last decade, significant progress has been made towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal /MDGs, especially in the area of reducing the incidence of HIV and the number of HIV-related deaths. Globally, countries are working hard to achieve the ambitious goals of the SDGs, to bring the world to some life-changing “zeros”, including AIDS⁴. In many parts of the world, the number of new HIV cases continues to decline. Access to antiretroviral therapy has increased at an extraordinary rate, avoiding millions of deaths⁵. Standard HIV/AIDS epidemic control measures- control, eradication-represent increasing levels of success in ending the incidence of this epidemic infection.

But, on the other hand, studies have shown that in some countries, there has been an increase of risky sexual behaviors among young people. Unfortunately, knowledge about HIV and HIV prevention remains low in this target group. Furthermore, stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS, continue to act as barriers to testing and seeking health care services.

The complexity of HIV / AIDS issues is very wide and goes beyond the medical aspects of the disease. Many of these issues are related to behavioral and social aspects, such as public awareness of disease and risk perception⁶, high-risk behaviors and willingness to be tested⁷, and social stigma⁸. Numerous multi-disciplinary studies have been conducted to uncover these socio-behavioral aspects of the disease.

In Albania, the HIV/AIDS epidemic appeared relatively later compared to other European countries - the first case of HIV was diagnosed in 1993⁹. Albania continues to be a country with a low prevalence of HIV infection. The prevalence of HIV infection in Albania is about 0.046%.

But although, Albania is considered a country with a low prevalence of HIV infection, the growing trend of cases is evident. Based on the seroepidemiological data of the Institute of Public Health, until November 2019, the number of people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in Albania, is 1298, with a tendency to increase the number of cases in the age group 15-24 years¹⁰.

The main sources of HIV/AIDS epidemiological data in Albania are: National HIV/AIDS Program, Infectious and Pediatric Service at QSUT, University Hospital for Lung Diseases, National Blood Transfusion Center, Voluntary Counseling and

Testing Centers at the prefectures level, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Public Health Directorates in the districts.

Data on persons tested for HIV are collected by completing the HIV file. Positive samples with the ELISA test are confirmed with the Western Blot test at the National HIV/AIDS Reference Laboratory at the Institute of Public Health or at the Laboratory of Microbiology, at QSUT.

PURPOSE

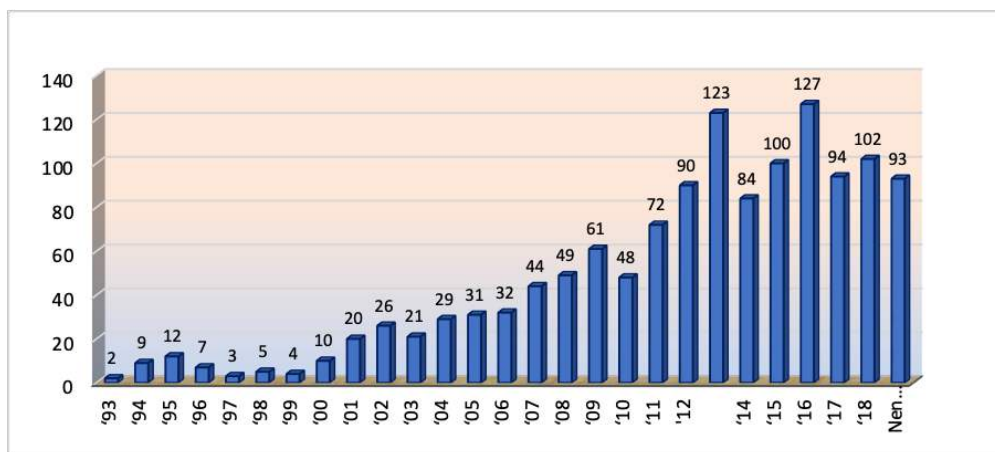
The purpose of this paper, is the analysis and assessment of the epidemiological situation of HIV/AIDS in Albania, for the period 1993 - November 2019.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents and analyzes the cumulative national data (1993- November 2019) of diagnosed seropositive cases. This data was provided to a group of different populations such as: people suspected of clinics, blood donors, volunteers at risk for HIV/AIDS, people from vulnerable groups to HIV/AIDS (injecting drug users, sex workers, men who have sex with men, victims of trafficking, etc.), transfused persons, pregnant women, as well as, persons seeking testing for the visa application. Positive sample data with the ELISA test, after being confirmed with the Western Blot test, were collected by completing the HIV file.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

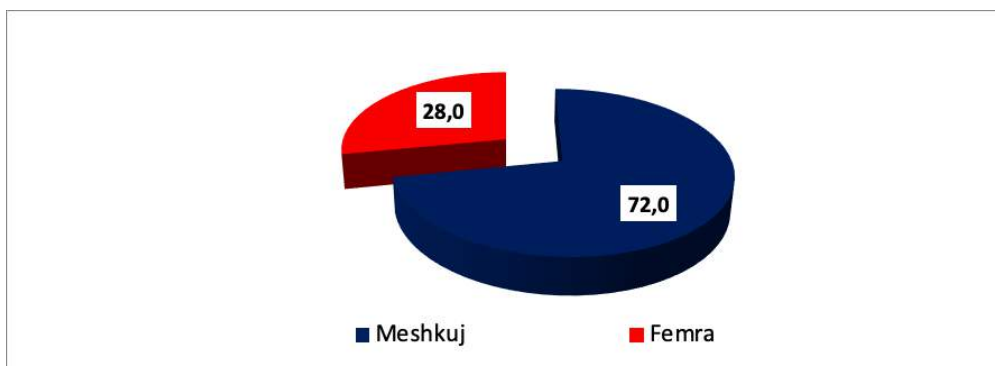
Based on the Institute of Public Health data, in Albania a total of 1298 cases of HIV infection have been registered (from the diagnosis of the first case of HIV positive in 1993 and until November 2019). The data show that despite the increasing trend in the number of cases, Albania continues to remain between countries with low prevalence of HIV infection in the general population - about 0.046% (population according to the 2011 Census). The number of cases diagnosed with HIV infection in 2019 alone (until November 2019) is 93.



GRAPH 1. Distribution of HIV cases by years (until November 2019)

Almost half of the HIV-positive cases (49.5%), reported in 2019, were referred by clinics and recommended tests. Other cases were respectively: 18.3% from voluntary testing at voluntary counseling and testing centers/QKTV, 14% from blood donor testing, 13% from epidemiological follow-up (for the partner or children); 3.3% of the tests for documentation reasons or confirmed from abroad and 2.2% belong to pregnant women tested in 2019 which are recommended by health staff (based on the guide line for prevention of infectious agents from mother to child).

Analysis of the distribution of HIV-positive cases by gender shows that 72% of cases (934 cases) are male and 28% (364 cases) are female. During 2019, 66 men and 27 women were diagnosed with HIV / AIDS. The lower number of women diagnosed with HIV infection is related to the smaller number of tests in women compared to men, although the number of women tested during 2019 has increased due to the testing of pregnant women.

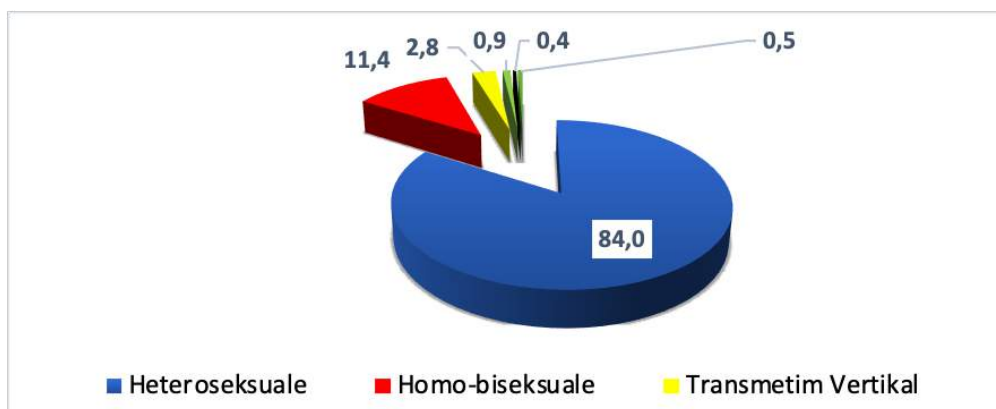


GRAPH 2. Total distribution of HIV cases by gender (%), November 2019

Sexual transmission (via heterosexual and homosexual intercourse) of the HIV virus, continues to be predominant in Albania - about 95% of cases. In recent years there has been an increasing trend in the number of men who have sex with men / MSM, diagnosed with HIV, but according to the Bio-BSS study, as well as the high level of stigma for the MSM community, the number of people who living with HIV belonging to this community, should be even higher¹¹.

Vertical transmission, from infected mother to child is 2.8% of total cases (36 cases; 1 case in 2019). Cases detection of vertical transmission (1997) and the increase of their number after the 2000s, led in 2015 the Ministry of Health to approve the guideline for screening pregnant women for some infectious agents, including testing for HIV¹². According to this guide, pregnant women are offered screening for HIV infection, in order to reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission of the virus, as well as to protect women's health.

Injecting drug users account for 0.4% of cases, although it has not been established whether they contracted HIV through the exchange of syringes. About 0.5% of the total cases, the transmission route is undefined.



GRAPH 3. Distribution of HIV cases by route of transmission (N = 1298)

The distribution of HIV positive cases by age groups, shows that in Albania predominates positive cases at 35-44 years age group, represent 29.8% of the total cases, followed by 25-34 age group years, with 27.3%, 45-54 age group years, with 17.7%, 55 -64 years old are 10.2%, 16-24 years old, 8.9%, while children 0-15 years old are 3.5% of the cases. A lower percentage represents the age group over 65 years, 2.5%. During 2019, one HIV-positive child was reported, bringing the total number of HIV-infected children to 45.

Analyzing the HIV/AIDS epidemiological data, by geographical areas, it is evident that the HIV epidemic continues to be a still urban phenomenon - 72.6% of HIV-positive people live in urban areas. The largest number of cases (46% of

them) are reported in Tirana, and with a large difference from Tirana are presented districts such as Durres (6.9%), Elbasan (6.2%), Vlora (3.9%), Lushnja (3.2 %) etc.

The number of voluntary HIV tests remains one of the important indicators to assess the epidemiological situation of HIV / AIDS. The main weight of HIV testing is occupied by blood donor tests that are performed as mandatory tests. Despite the interventions and efforts made these two decades to increase the number of voluntary tests, their level still remains quite low. Stigma continues to be one of the main barriers to HIV testing.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although with an increasing trend of cases diagnosed with HIV, Albania continues to remain a country with a low prevalence of HIV infection.

The sexual route of HIV transmission predominates in Albania

The age group most affected by HIV / AIDS is 25-45 years old, although HIV infection is present at all ages

HIV infection continues to be an urban phenomenon in Albania, and most cases of HIV infection are in Tirana.

The number of voluntary HIV tests remains low and a significant percentage of HIV positive cases are diagnosed at advanced stages

Stigma and discrimination against HIV-positive people continue to be one of the main barriers to HIV testing.

It is necessary to continue careful monitoring of HIV / AIDS epidemic in Albania and to strengthen HIV prevention programs, especially in key high-risk populations.

Continue to inform the population about HIV / AIDS and encourage voluntary HIV testing, is one of the ways of lowering the actual figures.

It is necessary to intensify informative, educational work with young people at all levels and by all actors. Promoting routine examinations among young people should be part of these interventions.

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