SOCIAL MEANING OF HIV/AIDS TO DRUG INJECTING FEMALES: EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN KUNMING, CHINA

ZHOU HONG MEI

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS (HEALTH SOCIAL SCIENCES)
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
MAHIDOL UNIVERSITY
2004

ISBN 974-04-4553-5
COPYRIGHT OF MAHIDOL UNIVERSITY
SOCIAL MEANING OF HIV/AIDS TO DRUG INJECTING FEMALES: EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN KUNMING, CHINA

ZHOU HONG MEI 4537981 SHHS/M

M.A. (HEALTH SOCIAL SCIENCES) MAJOR IN HEALTH SOCIAL SCIENCES

THESIS ADVISORS: SUPHOT DENDOUNG, Ph.D., LUECHAI SRINGERNYUANG, Ph.D. CHURNRURTAI KANCHANACHITRA, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Considering the increasing number of HIV/AIDS cases in China and the growing health problem among injecting drug users (IDUs) who are females, an exploratory qualitative study aimed at identifying the social meaning of HIV/AIDS to female IDUs has been conducted among 30 female IDUs in Kunming, China. The research objectives were reached through exploring the life of female IDUs with heroin. The results of this study were drawn from in-depth interviews and participatory observation.

The findings of this study show that all the respondents know the modes of HIV transmission because of their experience in detoxification centers. They perceived the severity of and the susceptibility to HIV infection. However, low condom use and high needle sharing were common among the female IDUs. When female IDUs craved heroin, HIV/AIDS means nothing, at that time even death is not a concern. AIDS means a life threatening disease to female IDUs only after their satisfaction from a heroin injection and securing enough money for another injection, or when they are free from heroin abuse.

The results show that female IDUs are living a desperate life with heroin abuse. Struggling with seeking money and heroin, all respondents hated being addicted to heroin and had attempted suicide as a solution. Being out of the main society, they regarded their partners as their real friends and their clients as their only non-drug-user friends, who they often had high risk behaviors with. To female IDUs the high risk behaviors are not only the behaviors of, but the access to heroin, money, trust and friendship. Therefore, this situation created their social understanding of HIV/AIDS.

The findings of this study suggest that prevention strategies of HIV/AIDS among female IDUs should be developed with consideration of the social meaning of HIV/AIDS to female IDUs.

KEY WORDS: SOCIAL MEANING / HIV/AIDS/ HEROIN/ FEMALE DRUG USERS/ QUALITATIVE RESEARCH