Author's response to reviews

Title: Educating the Power: HIV Policy and Parliamentarians of Pakistan

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Author's response to reviews: see over
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Dear Editor,

Thanks for the review of our manuscript. Following is our response to the Reviewers’ comments:

Reviewer 1 (Ume Abbas):
No changes suggested.

Reviewer 2 (Gregory Pappas):
As suggested earlier by this Reviewer, the original piece was modified to become a ‘commentary’.

The Reviewer kindly mentions in his review that “they say that the epidemic is not serious”.

In our defense, the Authors would like to point out that the epidemic of HIV is a very serious issue in Pakistan and that is why the whole endeavor for educating Parliamentarians took place. Throughout the piece, we have tried to emphasize and mention the precarious nature of the situation. To quote some examples:

- In Paragraph 8 of the Discussion section Line 3-4 it is mentioned “This rapid spread of HIV has certainly shaken the earlier otherwise dormant status-quo”

- In Paragraph 10 of the Discussion section Line 5 it is mentioned “Pakistan will be fighting a lost battle”

So the Authors would like to point out that they are fully aware of the serious nature of the HIV epidemic in Pakistan and have tried their utmost to present and reflect this ground reality.

The Reviewer kindly notes that “They also persist in the ridiculous statement that the epidemic started in Larkana. There is no evidence for this.” The Authors would like to point out that the first reported outbreak of HIV infection in Pakistan happened in Larkana, a small town of Sindh province. There are multiple references for this statement, the critical reference is cited again as below:

However, this said, there is still room for doubt, as the epidemic may very well have started elsewhere and the Larkana episode came into light because it was the first one to be reported. So the Authors keeping in mind the Reviewer’s reservation, have modified the text that mentions Larkana from “The recent HIV epidemic in IDUs also started in Sindh” in Paragraph 2 of the Discussion Section Line 8 to “The first reports of the HIV epidemic in IDUs also started in Sindh”, and from “The recent HIV epidemic started amongst the Injection Drug Users (IDUs) in Larkana” in Paragraph 8 of the Discussion section Line 1 to “The first reported outbreak of HIV infection in Pakistan amongst the Injection Drug Users (IDUs) community happened in Larkana”. The Reviewer correctly mentions that “HIV had been reported in every major city in the country” and we have also modified our earlier statement in Paragraph 8 of the Discussion Section Line 3-4 from “the epidemic evolved to spread to all major cities of Pakistan, including Lahore, Karachi and Hyderabad” to “there have been incidences recorded of HIV outbreaks from all major cities of Pakistan, including Lahore, Karachi and Hyderabad”. Therefore, the Authors would like to point out, in a nutshell, that they are only mentioning in the Larkana episode because it came out in literature as the first reported HIV outbreak. We do not claim that it was the actual first one or the trigger that initiated a ‘founder-effect’. All such lines giving such an impression have been removed from the manuscript.

The Reviewer kindly notes that “The gentle tone of the article is wholly inappropriate for Pakistan”. In their defense, the authors would like to say that they have presented the ground realities as pertains to HIV in Pakistan, without sounding overly dramatic. To quote an example, we write in Paragraph 1 of the Discussion Section Lines 1-3 “The HIV situation in Pakistan has not exploded yet[8]. HIV might still be a distant, albeit a very real threat, as evidenced by the spate of epidemics occurring amongst the IDU populace of Pakistan” and in the last line of the manuscript “all aiding greatly to prevent a steep incline in HIV/AIDS cases”. The fact remains that Pakistan is indeed at the cross-roads. As per the latest UN estimates (http://apps.who.int/globalatlas/predefinedReports/EFS2008/full/EFS2008_PK.pdf), the prevalence rate for HIV is less than 0.1% to 0.2% with estimates of people living with HIV less than 100, 000 – this in a country of 163+ million. That said, the situation in Pakistan is critical and time to act now, and we have repeatedly emphasized this issue in our writing, without sounding too rash and emotional.

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Please let us know if we can improve this manuscript further in any way.

Sincerely,

Authors.