Sir,

Money spent on HIV/AIDS prevention is essential; money wasted in the name of such prevention is a deadly sham. The World Bank lashed out recently at non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in India that practice financial deceit in the name of bettering the health of a nation which is home to one in six humans and has the unfortunate distinction of being among the leading nations in total AIDS cases. India’s National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) followed suit soon after, and dismissed nearly 350 NGOs which had pretended to be AIDS-fighting institutions while they channeled time and money in illegitimate directions 1. Under a grant from UNCFSP to explore the major sources of HIV/AIDS transmission and find ways to improve prevention efforts, four investigators from Claflin University visited India several times during 2006 and 2007. As they traveled extensively through India, the Claflin team was impressed with India’s rich heritage, its healthful fresh food (including mangoes) and its growing commitment to fight diseases (including HIV/AIDS). Personal experience and research demonstrated to them that financial oversight has been severely lacking.

They were amazed to notice the dearth of billboard and TV ads regarding HIV prevention, and wondered why India’s vast communications network has not been mobilized more fully to fight the epidemic. India has received over $193.7 million from the World Bank for HIV prevention and AIDS related causes but relatively little is visible in terms of mass media based prevention efforts 2. HIV/AIDS is not only a biological and medical problem, but also a serious communication challenge made more difficult by the complex cultural patterns of India. Increased spending for mass education via the mass media is imperative.

Based on the Claflin University team’s needs assessments, partner consultations, research, and visits to India, we identified several “Achilles’ heels” that may be key culprits in the spread of HIV in India. These include (i) the deadly immorality of truck drivers 3, (ii) the mistreatment of widows in Hindu culture 4, (iii) the absence of circumcision in both Hindu and Sikh cultures 5, (iv) the widespread use of unclean needles in medical facilities 6, (v) the displacement and misdirection of HIV/AIDS prevention efforts by the Indian government and NGOs 7, and (vi) systemic mistreatment of women in ways that spread the epidemic 8.

Despite NACO’s insistence that the World Bank’s scathing January 2008 Report 2 about rampant corruption in India’s anti-AIDS efforts has nothing to do with its own financial housecleaning, it is clear that NACO had little choice but to do something dramatic to try to rescue its reputation, and its funding opportunities. The problem of corruption is obvious but the more insidious problem of misplaced economic priorities may be even more serious. In a country that leads Asia in confirmed AIDS cases, a nation in which poverty plagues millions, one is shocked by the amount spent on non-necessities (such as birthday parties) while AIDS prevention and research efforts are not only chronically underfunded, but suffer from inefficient use of what funds are allocated. Surely a party in a chandeliered hotel, elaborate gifts, and teams of cameramen, photographers, and DJs constitutes misplaced values and priorities 9. Weddings have long been occasions for large expenditures but the birthday craze is more recent 9. These activities are merely symptoms of widespread waste and misallocation of public time and resources.

Avarice too often replaces genuine service and MONGOs (my own NGOs) too often damage the
reputation of authentic organizations; the Claflin team met representatives from many valid entities. Unfortunately, the same India that is famous for its mangoes is becoming infamous for its MONGOs. The war against deadly acronyms – whether HIV, AIDS, or MONGO – is a war worth fighting. The World Bank has taken a decisive move, NACO has acted, but more careful screening and supervision must become the norm. Only this can prevent NGOs from metastasizing into MONGOs.

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