

## Profile

### Kamiar and Arash Alaei: championing HIV/AIDS initiatives in Iran

Kamiar Alaei recounts with enthusiasm the way he and his older brother Arash recently transformed the health of some Iranian prisoners. The doctors offered advice on everything from basic hygiene and quitting smoking to dealing with drug addiction and HIV. What makes their work remarkable is that they were inmates too, after being sentenced in 2008 for “communicating with an enemy government”. When Kamiar, who was released earlier this year and is finishing a Doctor of Public Health degree at the SUNY Albany School of Public Health in New York, accepted the 2011 Jonathan Mann Award for Global Health and Human Rights on behalf of the brothers last month, his feelings were bittersweet; Arash is still in prison and could be there until 2014.

The Alaeis pioneered a national HIV/AIDS response in Iran that addressed social factors like stigma as directly as it did medical issues, such as access to antiretrovirals. This holistic approach reflects the values instilled in the brothers during their childhood in Kermanshah, western Iran. Their father was a scholar of Persian literature who dedicated hours to teaching poor students for free and they were also inspired by Ibn Sina, a renowned 11th-century Iranian physician, who devoted himself to the community.

The brothers studied medicine in Tehran during the 1990s and, in 1997, Kamiar noticed how a patient with HIV in his hospital was kept quarantined simply because health-care workers were scared. Realising the extent of this fear about HIV, the brothers set up a clinic in Kermanshah to treat people with HIV. A serendipitous change of government that year ushered in a more progressive rule under Mohammad Khatami, which eased the barriers to the Alaeis’ work. Their room was no bigger than a storage cupboard, but they knew that location is everything. Situating the clinic between a health clinic and a marriage guidance centre put it at the heart of community activity. While the patients had serious medical needs, their main concern was their social exclusion. “We turned into social workers, visiting our patients’ homes to educate their families, and even matchmaking occasionally”, says Kamiar. The Alaeis were also pivotal in ensuring that the government provided free antiretrovirals.

Without realising it, the brothers intuitively implemented integrated care approaches that were being promoted in global health, for instance, providing HIV care alongside treatment for other sexually transmitted diseases and for drug addiction. They called these “triangular clinics”, which were later set up in 67 Iranian cities. Designing a programme that is more innovative than many in developed countries—giving methadone and free needles to drug addicts—is no mean feat in such a conservative country. Kamiar says one factor in their success was giving patients what they wanted. He calls it a “restaurant approach”. “If people want tea, you

give them tea. You don’t make them drink coffee.” They also brought religious leaders on board by talking about comparative evils in Islam: for the clerics “if condoms and needle exchanges are bad, then HIV is worse”, says Kamiar. Imprisonment was one of the country’s biggest risk factors for contracting HIV, so in 2001 the brothers set up the first HIV clinic in Kermanshah prison.

The brothers’ work soon gained international recognition. WHO advised the rest of the Middle East and North African region to emulate the clinics, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria gave US\$15.8 million for a national plan to control HIV, drug addiction, and tuberculosis, designed by the Alaeis. All this happened within just 5 years of treating their first HIV patient. Buoyed by this response, they embarked on health diplomacy initiatives with countries like Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Between 2002 and 2007, Arash was Director of the International Education and Research Cooperation of the Iranian National Research Institute of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease. But the country’s political climate changed with the election to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Soon, the brothers’ activities were restricted, and while Arash stayed in Tehran, Kamiar started a Masters degree at Harvard. On one of Kamiar’s trips home in 2008, the pair were arrested “We just focused on HIV/AIDS, never on politics. We are so confused”, Kamiar says.

The doctors have global support. Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS, told *The Lancet* “Although the government of Iran finds it difficult to acknowledge, let alone address, the HIV-related needs of men who have sex with men and sex workers, I saw first hand exemplary harm reduction and other HIV-prevention programmes for people who use drugs during my recent visit to Iran. The world’s health depends on bridging different views through inclusive dialogue to find pragmatic, evidence and rights-based solutions. So, I was pleased to learn of the release of Dr Alaei. I hope it will enable him to resume his contribution to the exceptional AIDS response in Iran as well as much needed dialogue on ensuring universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support.”

Kamiar’s attitude remains impressively positive. There was no question that they would stop their work even in prison. “Instead of a 1-hour workshop, we could now work with them for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week”. They shored up prisoners’ wellbeing too by encouraging them to learn languages, play sports, or paint murals. Moving forward is the only option, Kamiar says: “Even if you get arrested, keep doing your job. As long as you are alive, until the last moment of your life, keep doing your job.”

Priya Shetty



Kamiar Alaei



Arash Alaei