

HIV at 25

Portland observes World AIDS Day

by Malka Geffen

This year marked some important anniversaries in HIV/AIDS history. On June 5, 1981, the Center for Disease Control published its first report on the virus that would later become known as AIDS. The report stated that from October 1980 to May 1981, five previously healthy gay men were treated for *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, an opportunistic infection of the lungs that causes a form of pneumonia to which only individuals with a weakened system due to HIV are susceptible.

Ten years ago, survival became a hopeful possibility with the introduction of highly active anti-retroviral therapies (HAART) in July 1996. Since then, numerous studies have shown a significant decrease in death rates of people with HIV/AIDS. In light of the 25th anniversary of the disease, the Multnomah County Health Department conducted its own study of the declining death rate.

HIV at 25: Mortality Decline in the HAART Era reports a decrease in HIV deaths in Multnomah County from its peak of 30 per 100,000 in 1994 to 4.1 in 2004, which is an 86 percent drop.

"I chose to write about HIV mostly because it was on my mind when I was looking for a topic for the second issue of the *Health Assessment Quarterly*," says Jon Duckart, senior research analyst and author of the report. "That led me to recall a recent examination of data on HIV disease deaths for Multnomah County. I was surprised and intrigued at the dramatic decline in deaths."

Duckart found that HIV, which was the sixth-leading cause of death in Multnomah County in 1994, is no longer in the top 20. This decline is larger than for any other cause of death in the county.

In addition to trends in death rates, the report examines demographic characteristics. A significant increase was found in the percentage of HIV deaths between 1990 and 2004 among racial and ethnic minorities, people 50 and older and those with less than a high school education. The report indicates that this increase is most likely due to increased proportions of racial and ethnic minorities with HIV through the years, as compared to white non-Hispanics. It also posits that those with HIV are growing older or living longer.

While an increase in death rates, even in terms of percentages, is bad news, the study also shows a significant decline in the percentage of deaths for all groups after HAART. Since national estimates show that the odds for African Americans to receive HAART is less than half that for

whites, the researchers expected to find reduced access to HAART for racial minority groups in Multnomah County as well.

"It turns out that in Multnomah County, the death rates for HIV-positive African Americans and white non-Hispanics were found to be about the same," Duckart says. This, he adds, implies that all demographics of residents are equally accessing HAART. "Perhaps Multnomah County is better than the nation at providing fair and equal access to HAART."

Loreen Nichols, manager of Multnomah County's HIV programs, says, "HAART really has changed the course of the disease." Nichols, who has been doing HIV work for 20 years, says as people are living fuller, longer lives, HIV has become more of a chronic disease than a fatal one. "[The county's] new infections has stayed steady, but the number of people with it is much larger."

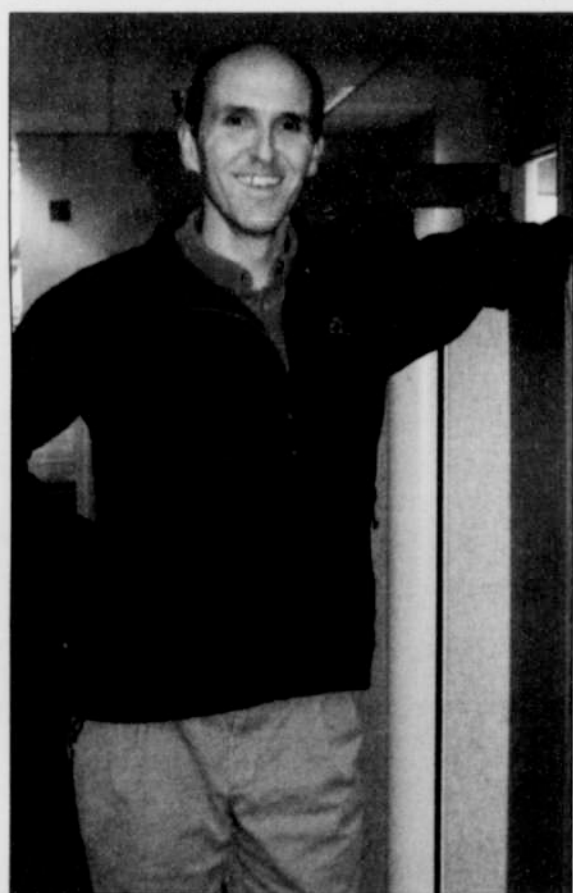
Although funding from the health resources and services administration has helped pay for medical care and case management for low-income people with the disease and the AIDS Drug Assistance Program has purchased insurance for some in need, Nichols is concerned about the increased burden on the health care system. "The Ryan White [Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency] Act is up for reauthorization, which could mean potentially big changes in services," she says.

Other potential problems with HIV treatment were enumerated in the county health department report. Though the HAART "cocktail" of anti-viral drugs allows people to live longer with less disease, it does not rid them of HIV. "This has led some experts to fear that individuals will mistakenly believe that the HIV crisis is over and that infection and death rates will grow as a result," the report states. There is also concern that HAART is simply delaying HIV-related deaths and that the death rate will climb again as HIV resistance to HAART increases.

"We need to stay very vigilant regardless of HAART," Nichols warns. "We will continue programs targeting African Americans and Latinos as well as men who have sex with men."

She also points to the service of people in proportion to their representation in the epidemic. "We don't want to see women, for example, not getting services."

According to Nichols, many people—nationally and locally—don't know they're infected, and 40 percent move to AIDS within a year. "We want to tighten that up and keep working with people to get diagnosed early." 



Jon Duckart recognizes the significance of the 25th anniversary of HIV.

MARTY DAVIS

World AIDS Day Events

Synagogue Screens Documentary

In recognition of World AIDS Day, Congregation Neveh Shalom will show the critically acclaimed film *A Closer Walk* 6 p.m. Dec. 10.

The documentary takes viewers to the epicenters of the AIDS plague, from Africa to Asia to Europe to America.

Neveh Shalom, at 2900 S.W. Peaceful Lane, will show this film for free and will have a guest speaker introduce the film and lead a discussion afterward. For more information call 503-246-8831.

South African Film Debuts

In honor of World AIDS Day, the uplifting documentary *Ithuteng* tells the stories of four students who are turning their lives around at the Ithuteng Trust School.

Ithuteng, which means "never stop learning" in South African vernacular, is also the guiding principle behind the Ithuteng Trust, founded in the Johannesburg ghetto of Soweto. Directed by first-time filmmaker Willie Ebersol when he was 16 and produced by his brother Charlie and friend Kip Kroeger, the exclusive presentation debuts 6:30 p.m. Dec. 3 on HBO and shows several more times throughout the month.

Keep the Promise

AIDS Action Project Northwest commemorates World AIDS Day with "Stop AIDS, Keep the Promise" from 5 to



Robert Bilheimer, director of *A Closer Walk*, holds HIV-positive Jancey, who was orphaned by AIDS, in Chennai, India.



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