

Health & Science



Figures Update AIDS Growth

The world is grappling with separate epidemics of the HIV virus with fresh cases no longer rising in Western nations but increasing rapidly in Africa and Asia, an AIDS expert said.

"We have two HIV epidemics in the world," Professor Max Essex of the Harvard AIDS institute told a conference on infectious diseases in the Indian capital.

"We have the epidemic in the West, which has something of the order of 2 million people infected and is plateauing or decreasing.

"Conversely, if we look at the other epidemic, the epidemic of sub-Saharan Africa and Thailand, India ... we see the number of people infected is of the order of 15-20 million and rising, increasing rapidly," Essex said.

Essex said AIDS contracted in Western nations mainly through homosexual contact and intravenous drug use was spread by HIV-1-B, a strain of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

But AIDS in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa is caused by other varieties of the virus, HIV-1-A, C and E, which are contracted

almost entirely by heterosexual contact, he said.

"Ninety to 95 percent of the disease is not in heterosexuals in North America and western Europe. Conversely, in virtually every other part of the world, 90 percent of HIV cases are associated with heterosexual contact," he said.

He said sex education in developing countries was practically nonexistent compared to AIDS awareness among youths in the West, a strong reason underlying unprotected sexual activity and the proliferation of HIV infection.

Essex cautioned researchers against complacency, saying most planned vaccines and therapy for AIDS were developed in the West and were consequently geared to dealing with HIV-1-B alone.

"If other HIV subtypes take hold in the West — and in my opinion that is inevitable — a heterosexual epidemic of significantly greater magnitude must be anticipated," he told the conference.

At least 22 million people have been infected world-wide by HIV, Essex said. More than a million people contracted HIV in Thailand in

less than five years while nearly 2 million Indians were infected, he said.

The World Health Organization estimates there could be at least five million people carrying the HIV virus in India by the end of the century.

"The most central question that concerns us both in prevention and treatment is the high rate of genetic mutation," the doctor said. "In a human being who lives 10 years, the virus that dominates may be 10 percent different from the virus that entered — a huge difference." Essex said the mainstay of AIDS research was shifting to prevention rather than therapy due to the growing cost of treating AIDS patients with increasingly long lives.

"The huge expense of treatment is only increasing in the U.S. which keeps patients alive for three or four years instead of one," he said.

"This means a \$50-100 million burden rather than a \$10-15 million burden for the U.S. as a whole."

Computers To Find Medicare Fraud

The U.S. government is to deploy powerful supercomputers, normally used to analyze weapons systems and nuclear stockpiles, to detect Medicare fraud, officials recently announced.

The Department of Health and Human Services has signed a \$6 million two-year contract with Los Alamos National Laboratories to use its computers to detect fraud and to

design systems to prevent errors and cheating, they said.

Medicare, a government-run health insurance for those over age 65 no matter what their income, each year handles more than 800 million claims, worth around \$180 billion. That volume makes it hard to detect fraud, a growing problem.

The Los Alamos National Labo-

ratory in New Mexico, operated by the University of California for the U.S. Department of Energy, is capable of searching vast amounts of data stored in different formats.

Medicare bills are handled by 70 different contractors, who in turn deal with hundreds of thousands of doctors, clinics, laboratories, hospitals and other health facilities.

Vitamins May Fight Eye Condition

Twice-a-day doses of a dietary supplement may help combat an eye condition that often leads to blindness in the elderly, according to new research.

The finding was based on a study of veterans in the United States who were given non-prescription antioxidant capsules containing 14 components, including zinc and vitamins C and E.

Researchers at the Department of Veterans Affairs writing in the current issue of the Journal of the Amer-

ican Optometric Association said the supplement appeared to prevent the progression of age-related macular degeneration.

The condition is a leading cause of blindness among older adults, affecting nearly 37 percent of those over the age of 75.

The report said recent studies have indicated that a diet lacking in certain vitamins, minerals and other substances contributes to the condition, in which central vision needed to see both near and far is gradually destroyed.

The study said a lower fat diet with high complex carbohydrates, moderate protein and five to nine portions a day of fruits and vegetables, including dark green leafy vegetables, is probably the best help for aging eyes.

But since many people do not follow such a diet, it said, attention must be paid to supplements.

The study said there are more than two-dozen antioxidant products billed as helpful to the eyes currently on the market.

New Drugs Give Hope In HIV Epidemic

New drugs to help control HIV and a test that can predict how quickly someone will develop AIDS give some reason for hope in the battle against epidemic, according to researchers at a major scientific conference.

Scientists are dubious about a cure for AIDS in the foreseeable future, but believe that in the coming years they will have more drugs capable of controlling HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, and prolonging lives.

The new test, which measures how much actual virus is in an infected person's blood, accurately forecasts whether someone is likely to develop AIDS quickly or live for 10 or more years without falling ill, Dr. John Mellors of the University of Pittsburgh said Tuesday.

The test of viral RNA plasma, made by Chiron Diagnostics, is useful both for helping doctors decide when and how aggressively to treat patients, and for scientists to evaluate experimental treatments. It is a more accurate prognosticator than more common tests which measure infection-fighting CD-4 blood cells, Mellors said.

"There's a real sense that we're making progress. But progress is in

the eye of the beholder," said Dr. Douglas Richman of the University of California at San Diego.

A cure is "unrealistic," but many smaller steps are being made in basic science, testing and treatments, said Richman and other organizers of the Third Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections.

Researchers presented data about more drugs — including some from Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. and from Abbott Laboratories — that are showing promise.

Interim results from the University of Texas, testing Bristol-Myers' drugs Zerit (stavudine, d4T) and Videx (ddI, didanosine) on 75 patients, showed a substantial reduction in viral load which appeared to be prolonged, and an increase in CD4 cells for as long as one year.

Abbott's experimental protease inhibitor ritonavir, combined with two other drugs AZT and ddC, also showed a powerful antiviral response in a French study of 21 patients, researchers told the conference. Abbott filed for FDA approval last month.

After six months, HIV activity was not detected in blood cells of six patients, or in the plasma of five patients taking the Abbott drug "cock-

tail," researchers said.

On Monday Merck researchers presented data from another protease inhibitor, indinavir, showing that it wiped out almost all of the virus for four to six months in most patients tested. Merck hopes to get approval to market the drug, which will be sold as Crixivan. Many conference participants said the protease inhibitor studies were the most exciting development yet against AIDS, although they cautioned that the studies have been small and fairly short-term. The verdict is still out on how useful they will be in the long haul, since AIDS can mutate and develop resistance to drugs.

In another development, New York Blood Center scientists recently reported that they had made a compound from ordinary milk and whey which can stop HIV transmission in a test tube.

The hope is that the finding could lead to inexpensive foams or creams that could be used with a condom to stop viral infection through sex.

However, developments that have looked promising in the laboratory have often failed in tests on animals and humans, which have not begun on this compound yet.

New Drug Fights TB And Other Diseases

Scientists have applied biotechnology to create a stronger germ that may more effectively fight tuberculosis (TB) and other human diseases.

The researchers boosted the bacille Calmette-Guerin (BCG) organism commonly used for both TB vaccines and for bladder cancer immunotherapy by packaging inside it five mammalian genes that stimulate the immune system.

The proteins produced by these genes, called cytokines, activate disease-fighting cells.

The work of the scientists from the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research in Cambridge and Boston's

Children's Hospital will appear in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. "The efficacy of BCG vaccines for TB varies tremendously from 0 to 80 percent," lead Whitehead researcher and co-author Richard Young said.

"While we already have that safe vaccine, which is widely used in humans against TB, it is not that effective. We are trying to find a way to soup it soup (boost it)," he said.

So far the researchers have tested the improved BCG in mice and have shown it can create an immune system response 10 times greater than normal BCG.

Young compared the human body's immune response to many battalions of white blood cells that are armored and ready to fight infection. The new form of BCG gives each battalion extra allotments of ammunition.

BCG is the most common TB vaccine; more than 2 billion people worldwide have taken it since it was developed in 1914.

TB remains a major killer in many societies. About one-third of humans worldwide are infected with TB, and 1 to 3 million people die from it each year. There are 10,000-20,000 cases annually in the United States.

Olestra Warning Label Wanted On Ads

A consumer group has asked the Federal Trade Commission to require Procter & Gamble to put the same warning label on its advertisements for the fat substitute as is required on its package labels.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest cited recent newspaper ads headlined "No fat. No Compromises," but said there were compromises.

It noted that when the Food and

Drug Administration approved the fat substitute for some snack foods, including potato chips and crackers, it required a label to warn users that olestra may cause abdominal cramping and loose stools.

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