

Health & Science



Virulent spread of HIV infections among Minorities

A comprehensive report that sheds new light on the terrible severity of drug-related AIDS epidemic among African Americans and Latinos and the need for an appropriate governmental response is being released on December 1, 1996, World AIDS Day. Joycelyn Elders, M.D., former US Surgeon General, in her foreword to the study, zeroes in on the devastation to African American and Latino families in the United States where AIDS is now the leading cause of death among persons between 25 and 44. "The shocking fact is that half of those deaths are injection-related."

Said Dawn Day, Ph.D., the study's author.

Among persons who inject drugs, African Americans are four times more likely than whites to have contracted AIDS, and Latinos are at least one and a half times more likely than whites to have contracted AIDS.

All racial/ethnic groups begin at the same point: almost no AIDS cases per million among those ages 16 to 20. The rate of increase with age is relatively slow for whites and more rapid among Latinos and African Americans. Thus by the time people reach the ages of 41 to 45, the inci-

dence of injection-related AIDS among African Americans is eight times that of whites, and among Latinos it is eight times that of whites.

Fortunately, there is prevention technology available. Clean needle programs are very inexpensive. Treating people with AIDS is not. The cost to society of treating the 25,000 cases of injection-related AIDS diagnosed last year will be over \$3 billion.

"This powerful report brings home the severity of the problem of AIDS spread through dirty needles." "It makes me angry!" "We do not allow

people to get clean needles that would reduce the spread of HIV disease."

"Yet we do not mind spending the \$119,000 or more for each person who develops AIDS to take care of them, to watch them die." "That makes no sense!" "We have got to be about preventing problems, not fixing things after they are broken," said Dr. Elders, Professor, University of Arkansas Medical Center.

"Unless we find the moral commitment and political will to carry out proven prevention methods like clean needle programs and to make clean needles accessible, AIDS will

ravage every minority community across the country." "We have the tools and know-how to stem the intravenous spread of HIV." "The only missing factor is the determination by our public officials to make saving lives a higher priority than sloganeering about 'zero tolerance for drugs.'" Said Dr. Day.

The report, titled Health Emergency 1997: The Spread of Drug-Related AIDS Among African Americans and Latinos, presents many new statistics on the spread of HIV among African Americans and Latinos and realistic prescriptions for policy mak-

ers. Focusing heavily on authoritative studies that support clean needle programs as a critical preventive for the spread of HIV infection among drug-injectors and their wives, husbands and newborn babies, Dr. Day presents a social, moral, and public health policy analysis of the AIDS epidemic.

Dr. Dawn Day is currently Director of the Dogwood Center, an independent research organization in Princeton, New Jersey. She is an activist scholar with almost 30 years experience as a research and writer on social issues.

Ronald McDonald house children see and talk to loved ones back home

Intel and IBM are providing video phone systems to Ronald McDonald House of Portland.

The Ronald McDonald House of Portland, Oregon unveiled a new program for children being treated at local hospitals to use the latest video phone technology to see and hear their loved ones back home.

In many cases, children at these hospitals cannot have visitors during their treatment and recovery, which can involve long periods of time away from home.

For a child away from home and faced with difficult challenges, seeing and hearing your loved ones can help in the child's recovery.

IBM Corporation and Intel Corporation along with the Ronald

McDonald House of Portland, Doernbecher Hospital, Legacy Emanuel Children's Hospital, and Shriner's Hospital have joined forces in an exciting project to enable communications between children and families via new video phone technology.

Intel and IBM provided eight IBM Aptiva personal computers equipped with Intel Video Phone with Proshare technology to the Ronald McDonald House of Portland.

Each of the Video Phone systems allow users to transform a regular phone call into a video phone call.

A video phone system will be located at the Ronald McDonald House and each of the local chil-

dren's hospitals. Additional Video Phone Systems will be located in the homes of patients staying at the Ronald McDonald House.

The Ronald McDonald House provides a home away from home for families with ill children who have traveled a distance to receive medical care in Portland area hospitals.

"As a result of technology provided by Intel and IBM, we'll be able to keep children and their families close when they need it most, not only at our current location also but as a service to families at our new house scheduled to open in April," said Jan Stranski, Operations Manager, Ronald McDonald House of Portland, Oregon.

Ataxia testing improves

Genetic discoveries during the last three years are enabling doctors to test for four hereditary ataxias.

Ataxia involves a loss of muscle coordination often characterized by balance and walking problems, clumsiness in reaching and slurred speech. Many of its varieties are progressive.

"Knowing the type of ataxic disease can make a big difference in disease management," said Dr. Tetsuo Ashizawa, director of The Ataxia Clinic at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

In addition to its heredity forms, ataxia can also be caused by diseases such as stroke, multiple sclerosis or brain tumors or by drug or alcohol overdose.

Baylor's clinic, Ashizawa says, focuses on inherited ataxias and ataxias with no known cause.

"Once we make a genetic determination of ataxia type, we can pro-

vide genetic determination of ataxia type, we can provide genetic counseling as to risk of passing it on to your children," Ashizawa said. "If needed, we can do testing and counseling for other family members and prenatal testing."

Knowing the specific type of ataxia, also alerts the doctors to any possible complications.

"There are different rates of progressive and different risks," he said. "A patient with Friedreich ataxia will be at greater risk for heart, nerve and glucose metabolism complications."

Baylor's clinic and Kleberg DNA diagnostic lab currently test for spinocerebellar ataxia type 1 (SCA1), Machado-Joseph disease (SCA3), Friedreich ataxia, and dentatorubropallidolusian atrophy (DRPLA).

Patients at the ataxia clinic also benefit from 'one-stop' access to

multi-disciplinary services.

"The monthly clinic provides neurological evaluations, genetic evaluation and counseling, physical rehabilitation, psychological services," Ashizawa said. "Most patients come to the clinic every three to four months."

Bringing ataxia patients together on one day allows more communication between patients, Ashizawa says. It also will promote better patient awareness of research opportunities.

"Baylor has a strong background in ataxia research with discoveries of the genetic mutations linked to two major forms--SCA1 and Friedreich ataxia," he said. "The ataxia clinic, one of the few in the nation, is another way to build on our base of information."

Clinic senior advisor is Dr. Huda Zoghbi, who discovered the SCA1 gene.

Relief for Parkinson's disease tremors

An electrode implanted in the brain allows doctors and patients to "turn off" Parkinson's disease tremors.

"The procedure, deep brain stimulation, is still in the research phase in the United States," said Dr. Richard Simpson, a neurosurgeon at Baylor College of Medicine in Hous-

ton.

The technique requires patients to be awake under local anesthesia while doctors implant an electrode into the deep portion of their brain called the thalamus. Once placed, the electrode is connected to a transmitter and tested at different frequencies.

Researchers believe the high-frequency stimulus generated by the electrode jams the brain impulses that create the tremors.

"The results are dramatic," Simpson said, "with tremors stopping while the current is in and starting once the current is off."

The best candidates are Parkinson's patients in good overall health who have tremors as their main problem and do not respond to medications.

The procedure has been successful in Europe and is being tested at Baylor and five other U.S. medical centers.

Teenagers risky behavior

Four leading risk categories make the teen years especially fraught with hazards. "Drinking alcohol while doing other activities, failure to use safety devices, access to firearms and sports are the big four," said Dr. Albert C. Hergenroeder, chief of adolescent and sports medicine at Baylor College of Medicine and Texas Children's Hospital, both in Houston.

In the 1940's, school "dangers" for teens included being caught chewing gum, running in the hallways or wearing improper clothing. Today's teen must contend with drug abuse, date rape and assault.

What's a parent to do? Talk, inquire and wait, Hergenroeder said. "Don't wait for them to talk to you," he said. "Talk with them first. Many parents fall for the 'not my child' myth and fail to realize their teen could be engaging in risky behavior."

When talking, ask specific, sometimes blunt, questions: What do you do for fun? Do you drink and drive? Do your friends? If your teen's behavior is not risky, congratulate them. Even the best teenagers will do dangerous things. Hergenroeder urges parents not to give up.

Children and cancer

Childhood cancer is extremely rare, but parents can have a healthy awareness about possible symptoms by remembering the acronym Children.

"Childhood cancer can be difficult to recognize because the symptoms are similar to other childhood illnesses," said Dr. David G. Poplack, head of the Texas Children's Cancer Center at Baylor College of Medicine and Texas Children's Hospital in Houston; however, parents can know the eight warning signals of possible childhood cancer by thinking "Children":

• Continued, unexplained weight

loss

- Headaches with vomiting in the morning
- Increased swelling or persistent pain in bones or joints
- Lump or mass in the abdomen, neck or elsewhere
- Development of whitish appearance in the pupil of the eye
- Recurrent fevers not due to infections
- Excessive bruising or bleeding
- Noticeable paleness or prolonged tiredness.

"It's always a good idea to see your pediatrician if you have concerns," Poplack said.

Keeping the weight off

Exercise alone, not diet and exercise, is the key to keeping the weight off.

According to a two-year study conducted at Baylor College of Medicine's DeBakey Heart Center in Houston, people who exercise without following a restricted diet maintain their weight.

"This confirms what we have known all along--people who diet fail at it because they feel deprived," said Dr. Ken Goodrick of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Baylor. "By overcoming negative attitudes about exercise, people can learn to enjoy it and appreciate the benefits."

The study consisted of 127 overweight men and women who were placed in one of three groups: a diet-and-exercise group, a diet-only group and an exercise-only group.

During the first year of the study, the diet-only and diet-and-exercise groups lost the most weight. But by the second year, both groups regained the weight.

The exercise-only group members were taught by psychological and physical benefits of exercise. They lost weight and maintained the loss.

The study findings were published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association.

New alternative fuel trucks in production

Freightliner has been awarded a contract to build 50 alternative fuel delivery trucks with Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) technology for the United States Postal Service (USPS). The two-ton mail trucks will be used for daily delivery in New York City.

The vehicles will be some of the first medium-duty trucks of their type built by an original equipment manufacturer (OEM) to include a Cummins CNG engine. To date, the majority of medium-duty trucks have been converted to alternative fuel and only buses and light-duty vehicles have been available from OEMs.

The Freightliner model MT 45 chassis has a Cummins 5.9-liter natural gas engine which achieves a maximum of 150 horsepower at 2,500 rpm. The truck will have a 148" wheelbase, a gross vehicle weight of 15,200 lbs., and two 16" by 54" fuel tanks.

The contract is part of a joint venture between the USPS and the

Department of Energy (DOE) and will be partially funded by DOE. The two organizations have partnered to foster production and use of alternative fuel vehicles.

"We are proud to be a partner in this project, which will kick-start the medium-duty vehicle market for alternative fuels," said Lee Slezak, Federal Fleet AFV program manager for the DOE. "The dedicated CNG two-ton delivery vehicles are a viable option to diesel and gasoline trucks, especially when used in high annual mileage applications. The knowledge and experience we gain with these vehicles will help make future offerings even better."

"We were drawn to Freightliner because it is the only manufacturer that offers a dedicated CNG package in a walk-in van," said Han Dinh, USPS project manager for vehicle and carrier equipment. "Freightliner also has a long tradition of building durable, reliable trucks. The combination of Freightliner's reputation

with the CNG technology will result in a superior product."

"We're moving into a new area by building in the CNG technology from the ground up. In the past, all CNG vehicles have been conversions," said Marv Hoff, president of Freightliner Custom Chassis Corporation. "This is a significant new market for us as urban areas across the country work to meet new emission standards and improve air quality."

The new USPS truck engines will be built by Cummins, which has pioneered production of the CNG engine. The Cummins B5.9-150G engine will be installed in the USPS vehicles. By building a truck with a dedicated CNG engine, the USPS expects vehicles to be more efficient and last longer. Engines that have been converted to natural gas often do not have the extensive modifications necessary to optimize performance.

Both the USPS and the DOE will be collecting data on the Freightliner


CNG trucks. The Gas Research Institute has received a grant to assist in the monitoring of the vehicles' performance, durability and emissions.

The 50 Freightliner trucks will be delivered to USPS in July 1997.

The USPS currently has the largest alternative fuel fleet in the nation. It has converted some 7,000 mail delivery trucks to compressed natural gas.

Freightliner Corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon, produces and markets commercial vehicles in Class 4-8 and is a member of the Mercedes-Benz AG group, the world's largest commercial vehicle manufacturer.

Freightliner entered in 1995 the Class 3-7 bus and chassis market serving the delivery walk-in van, school bus, shuttle bus, motor home and commercial air freight segments. Freightliner is building on the CNG experience to provide similar products to other customers.



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