

# AIDS Still Here, Still Spreading, Still Killing

BY HEATHER PEAKE

It was my own fault. You should never go into research with preconceived notions, but I did. Recently, I needed some statistics on HIV/AIDS, and I expected them to conform to my sense that the AIDS epidemic is pretty well over. I was very, very wrong.

Wherever did I get this idea to begin with? I read the paper. I watch the news. Over the last couple of years, the news has been generally positive. New drugs. A lower death rate. And no news can be good news, too. A decade ago, rarely did a day pass without some mention of the disease, some frightening new statistic, some famous new victim, some issue to debate. Now, AIDS had all but vanished from the public discourse. All this gives the impression that AIDS has become a manageable disease, chronic rather than fatal.

That, of course, is a dangerous assumption. While new

drug therapies have made it possible for many people to stay healthy longer, AIDS remains lethal. Today, 665,000 Americans are living with HIV/AIDS, and about 40,000 contract the disease each year. The face of AIDS is changing as well: while gay men still predominate, the virus is now making itself felt within African-American community, women, the elderly, and, tragically, the young. Half of all new cases are under 25.

Outside the US, the virus is growing exponentially. This spring, there were 33.4 million known cases of HIV/AIDS worldwide, and we'll pass the 40-million mark by New Years. World health officials say the virus spreads to 16,000 people a day — 667 per hour. At least 14 million people have died since the virus emerged 18 years ago.

The numbers don't become less incomprehensible on a smaller scale. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 10 percent of the world's population, but accounts for 70 percent of all

known cases and 80 percent of all AIDS-related deaths. Currently, 25 million Africans are infected. In some regions, one person in four is HIV-positive. Since 1981, 12 million people have died. By 2005, the death toll will be 13,000 people a day. By 2015, the average life expectancy in some countries will have dropped from 64 to 47.

Although Africa has borne the brunt of the epidemic so far, that is expected to change within the decade. Continental Asia is about to become Ground Zero. The virus is already entrenched in Southeast Asia and Oceania, with about 6.7 million cases. Now it is gaining a foothold in the former Soviet Union, China, and India.

Big numbers and body counts don't convey the whole picture. Large as these numbers are, they're under-estimates. Researchers admit they have little data from West and North Africa, the Middle East, China and parts of Latin America. And bear in mind

that epidemics profoundly alter the lives of the unafflicted as well. In that sense, only one statistic really matters: 92-95 percent of all HIV/AIDS cases live in what we politely call 'developing' nations.

That verb will become increasingly mocking as the epidemic grinds on. These are countries ill equipped to handle a major health crisis, much less launch public education campaigns to stem the spread of the disease. Medical resources in heavily infected areas are already stretched to the limit. Most victims will receive only the barest supportive care.

Given the reality of finite budgets, governments will face Faustian choices. Every dollar that goes to AIDS victims is a dollar that cannot go to modernizing infrastructure, schools, factories, armies. Stable economies cannot be built where a high percentage of the workforce is sick or dead. AIDS will have the same destabilizing impact as a world war, and will hold these

countries back for decades.

Should we care about this? Absolutely. We benefit from a healthy world populace the way we benefit from a clean environment. After all, we share the same biosphere. And there is a moral imperative here. Spewing pabulum about the 'global village' means nothing if we don't back it up with action. We cannot turn our back on mass human suffering and still consider ourselves a compassionate nation.

I was ashamed to learn all this because I quickly realized the information had been there all the time — I just hadn't paid attention. I made the same mistake people made when AIDS came to America: ignored it because I didn't identify with the victims. "Just a bunch of gays, who cares?" A lot of people suffered needlessly for that attitude. Now it's "just" Africans, Asians, Indians, Russians. And I wonder: is this a mistake we can afford to make twice? ▼

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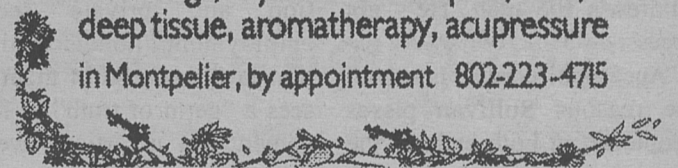
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