



## WORLD AIDS DAY

December 1, 2003

*Health and political leaders across the world join together for World AIDS Day to combat the spread of the disease and honor those who are working to eradicate it.*

In the five minutes that it takes you to read this or walk in the hallway between classes, 25 people around the world will die of AIDS, the disease that destroys the body's immune system. HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, has infected 42 million men, women and children worldwide, 5 million in the last year alone.

AIDS, or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, was first diagnosed in early 1981 but it is believed to have been around since the 1970s. No one is exactly sure where it originated. HIV, or Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is transmitted through sex, sharing needles, infected blood and from mother to child during pregnancy or birth.

Since 1988 the United Nations has recognized Dec. 1 as World AIDS Day, a day dedicated to the worldwide fight against AIDS and to the people and organizations that are joined in this effort.

### **AIDS around the world**

HIV/AIDS can be found in most every continent in the world, but Africa continues to be the hardest hit, according to a report published by UNAIDS and the World Health Organization. Thirty percent of people living with HIV/AIDS are in sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa has more people with HIV than any other country – 5.3 million. But other countries are experiencing rising numbers of infections, too, and are on the verge of major epidemics, including China, India, Indonesia and Russia.

While praising the achievements in the fight against the virus, experts say that more must be done.

“It is quite clear that our current global efforts remain entirely inadequate for an epidemic that is continuing to spiral out of control,” said Dr. Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS. “Today’s report warns regions experiencing new HIV epidemics that they can either act now or pay later – as Africa is now having to pay,” he added.

In the United States, rates of HIV infection have remained steady at 40,000 new cases per year, according to a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, in 29 states that tracked the virus between 1999 and 2002 there was an increase in diagnosis by 5.1 percent.

Half of those diagnosed were in the African-American community and the rate of new infection among gay men of all races increased by 17 percent.

## **World AIDS Day**

In an effort to promote awareness and action, the World Health Organization, UNAIDS and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria have joined in a campaign to bring AIDS drugs to those in the poorest nations. Called the "3 x 5" campaign, the program aims to provide anti-retroviral treatment to 3 million people with AIDS by the end of 2005.

"The lives of millions of people are at stake. This strategy demands massive and unconventional efforts to make sure they stay alive," said World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Lee Jong-wook.

Antiretroviral drugs, which block the action of viruses like HIV, are the most effective manner to treat HIV/AIDS and the only way to transform HIV from a death sentence to a chronic but stable illness. Patients taking the latest combination treatments can survive at least a decade.

Although widely available in the developed world, the drugs are expensive and difficult to distribute among patients in the poorest nations of the world.

Only 75, 000 of HIV-infected Africans are receiving the treatments – out of the 4 million who need them.

"That is really not acceptable and we have no chance of halting this epidemic if we're not going to make sure that everybody who needs it has access to treatment," Piot said.

However, many of the largest drug companies have said that lowering the price of their products would limit the research necessary to develop new drugs, and perhaps someday, a cure.

World leaders in various parts of the world are recognizing World AIDS Day in ways both expected and unexpected. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited people with AIDS in a Beijing hospital - something no other Chinese political leader has done. In Saudi Arabia the government unexpectedly admitted that there are nearly 7,000 AIDS cases and that they would initiate a campaign to combat the disease. Marches and rallies are being held in India, Cambodia, Turkey and Portugal, as well as other countries.

Private, governmental and community organizations across the United States have sponsored events to generate awareness about HIV prevention, treatment and living with HIV/AIDS.

*By Annie Schleicher, NewsHour Extra*

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