

No evidence of new HIV-like epidemic

Initial fears of a potential epidemic of a new viral AIDS-like disease in humans have been calmed after scientific meetings in the United States of America (14 August 1992) and at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva, Switzerland (28–29 September 1992).

To date, fewer than 100 cases of AIDS-like disease or severe immunosuppression without other explanation have been found over a period of at least six years among people who are not infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The small number of cases spread out over a relatively long period of time has led scientists to conclude that there is no epidemic of a new cause of severe immunosuppression. The scientists further concluded that the evidence available does not suggest that these cases are due to a new HIV-like virus or any other infectious agent that could be transmitted, including transmission through blood or blood products.

During the VIIIth International Conference on AIDS in Amsterdam in late July, several investigators from the United States of America and other industrialized countries reported the occurrence of severe immunosuppression in people who were not infected with HIV, the virus which causes AIDS. During the same conference, preliminary data were presented on virus-like particles, different from HIV, which were presented on virus-like particles, different from HIV, which were reportedly present in a very small number of these patients.

Following these reports, an extensive search for new cases of unexplained severe immunosuppression without evidence of HIV infection was mounted in the United States of America by the Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia, and elsewhere in the world by WHO. In August 1992, 39 scientific institutions in 21 countries in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Europe, Latin America and the

Caribbean were contacted and sent a detailed case-reporting form by WHO along with instructions for the shipment of laboratory specimens from patients identified.

The preliminary results of the United States of America search for new cases were discussed at the meeting in Atlanta in August 1992, and further results from that search and the one conducted by WHO were discussed at the subsequent meeting in Geneva. Both meetings concluded that severe immunosuppression not due to HIV infection or other known causes of immunosuppression is rare, in both industrialized and developing countries. Some cases of unexplained immunosuppression without HIV infection could ultimately be shown to be attributable to temporary suppression of white blood cells, infections such as tuberculosis, or genetic conditions. Although preliminary reports suggest the presence of several different microorganisms from a very small number of cases, these findings have not yet been duplicated in other laboratories, and their role, if any, is unclear. No definitive evidence for any new virus causing immunosuppression was presented.

The WHO meeting which concluded today agreed that it is important to continue research efforts in this area. This should include studies to know more about the extent of the condition, studies to further confirm that it is not transmissible, and further investigation and characterization of any possible infectious agents and determination of their role, if any. However, the priority today is to continue to concentrate efforts and resources on the prevention and control of AIDS, in the light of WHO estimates that HIV has already infected some 11–13 million people around the world.

World Health Organization, Geneva