

13 million HIV positive women by 2000

New figures released by the World Health Organization (WHO) show that by the year 2000, over 13 million women will have been infected by HIV and about 4 million of them will have died. More than 1 million women will become infected in 1993 alone.

WHO estimates that almost half of all newly infected adults are women. As infections in women rise, so do infections in the infants born to them. To date, these total about 1 million, of whom half a million have already developed AIDS. On average, world wide, about one-third of babies born to HIV infected mothers are themselves infected.

More than 14 million people world wide are believed to have become infected with HIV since the start of the epidemic. However, so far less than one fifth of these have gone on to develop AIDS, and fewer still have died of the infection. So many people have already been infected that the cumulative number of AIDS cases will quadruple by the year 2000.

In industrialized countries, transmission is still often through homosexual contact or injecting drug use. But there is an ominous rise in heterosexual transmission. Last year in the USA, AIDS cases in women were almost 10% higher

than the year before. In 1992, sex became the leading cause of AIDS in American women. In Scotland a significant proportion of new HIV infections in some cities are acquired through sex between men and women. Drug injecting is the background to many of these infections, acquired through sex with a male drug user.

In many developing countries, heterosexual transmission has been predominant from the outset. In sub-Saharan Africa, women becoming infected with HIV now outnumber men by 6 to 5. The number of women becoming infected continues to rise. In Malawi, infection rates among women attending ante-natal clinics increased from about 3% in 1985 to over 30% this year.

But why is it that HIV infections in women are growing world wide? There are three main reasons.

Women are biologically more vulnerable

As the receptive partner, women have a larger mucosal surface exposed during sexual intercourse; moreover, semen contains a far higher concentration of HIV than vaginal fluid. Hence women run a bigger risk of acquiring HIV infec-

tion – and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Women are epidemiologically vulnerable

Women tend to marry or have sex with older men, who may have had more sexual partners and hence be more likely to have become infected. Women are also epidemiologically vulnerable to HIV transmission through blood. In the developing world women frequently require a blood transfusion during pregnancy or child birth – for example, because of anaemia, or hemorrhage.

Women are socially vulnerable to HIV

Men are expected to be assertive and women passive in their sexual relationships. In some cultures, men expect sex with any women receiving their economic support. Whenever, these traditional norms predominate, the result is sexual subordination, and this creates a highly unfavourable atmosphere for AIDS prevention. An environment in which it is difficult or even impossible for women to protect themselves from sexual transmis-

sion, through mutual fidelity or condom use.

Summing up what can be done to reduce the vulnerability of women to HIV infection, highlighted a number of suggestions. Among them are:

- biomedical scientists should give top priority to developing a vaginal virucide or microbicide active against HIV and other STDs
- national AIDS programmes should implement effective interventions aimed at men, such as needle exchange programmes

for injecting drugs users and vigorous condom promotion

- young girls, who are especially vulnerable, should be taught how to protect themselves from HIV infection
- women should be encouraged to seek and should receive good STD care
- and, men everywhere can help put an end to social traditions which lead to women's subordination.

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