

WHO estimate of HIV infection tops 14 million

Latest estimates reveal that an estimated 14 million people have been infected by HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus which causes AIDS. By the year 2000, WHO estimates that between 30 and 40 million people will have been infected by the virus. The worst affected area is sub-Saharan Africa where WHO estimates that over eight million people have been infected. Of this total, about half to two thirds were in east and central Africa, an area which accounts for only about one sixth of the total population of the sub-Saharan region.

The cities of central and east Africa have so far borne the greatest burden, with as many as one out of every three adults infected, but the virus is increasingly following roads and rivers into the countryside, and spreading to southern and western Africa.

Reports from Nigeria, a country with almost one fifth of sub-Saharan Africa's population, indicate that HIV has begun to spread throughout the country. For example, HIV prevalence rates of up to 15–20 percent were found among groups of female sex workers.

As HIV continues to spread, the numbers of AIDS cases in Africa are increasing. Already, an estimated one and three quarter million men, women and children in sub-Saharan Africa have developed AIDS, two-thirds of the global figure. The cumulative total of AIDS cases in Africa is expected to exceed five million by the end of this century.

But the most alarming trends of HIV infection are in South and South East Asia, where the epidemic is spreading in some areas as fast as it was a decade ago in sub-Saharan Africa. WHO estimates that over one and a half million HIV infections have occurred in adults in the South and South-East Asia regions. While the majority of reported infections

appeared in two countries – India and Thailand – high rates of HIV spread into specific populations have been seen elsewhere in the region.

There is mounting concern for other newly infected areas. Latest estimates show that over one and a half million adult HIV infections have occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean since the epidemic began. The future course of the epidemic in the region depends very much on how fast and how far the virus spreads in Brazil, which already has more AIDS cases than any country outside Africa apart from the United States.

The epidemic has taken hold in the Middle East and North Africa where WHO estimates that more than 75 000 infections have so far occurred. These figures are of particular concern because although only limited information is available for this region, reports suggest the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases and injecting drug use – factors which expose people to the risk of HIV infection. Current developments in Eastern Europe and Central Asia may also spur the rate of transmission in the region. At the moment it is estimated that 50 000 adults have been infected with HIV. However, economic crisis, rising unemployment, ethnic and religious conflict, the displacement of civilian population and the disruption of families encourage the kinds of behaviour that spreads HIV. Of equal concern, drug use and prostitution are on the rise. In East Asia and the Pacific, WHO estimates that by late 1992 over 25 000 infections in adults had occurred. The limited data available indicate that the 663 cumulative AIDS cases reported by January 1993 represent reasonably accurately the current status of the epidemic in most of East Asia and the Pacific.

World Health Organization, Geneva