

Killer disease sweeps through African states

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THE DEADLY disease AIDS has taken a grip on much of Central and East Africa and is spreading rapidly through heterosexual communities there.

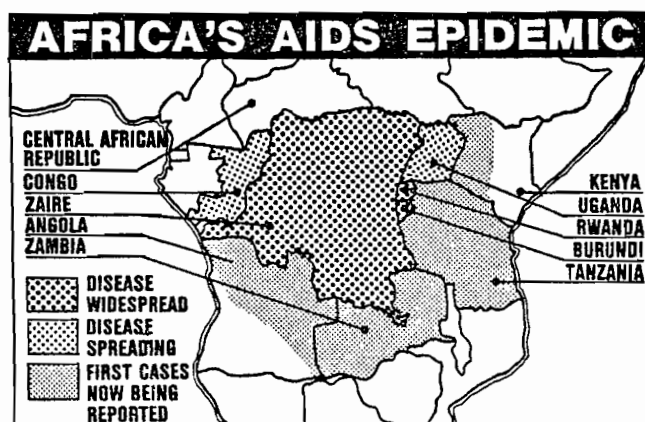
Scientists have warned that urgent preventive measures must be taken to forestall a similar spread in Europe and America.

Doctors are particularly alarmed about the extent of the African epidemic. Previously, it was thought that AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was an old African disease that had survived unnoticed in isolated pockets there.

But, at an international conference on infectious diseases in Cairo a few days ago, scientists reported that AIDS was now spreading as quickly among African heterosexuals as it was among European and American homosexuals and drug users.

Cases of the disease, which destroys the power to fight various cancers and pneumonias, are doubling every seven or eight months. It is already a major public health problem in several areas. 'AIDS may be an old African disease, but this is certainly a new epidemic,' said one scientist.

Already, nine countries are seriously affected and in some, infections have reached very high levels. In the cities of Zaire, one in 10 people is thought to be carrying the virus and in one study in Uganda, 20 per cent of those sampled were



carriers. Men and women are affected equally, and about one in 10 is likely to develop the disease.

'Quite frankly, we don't know what is happening,' said Dr Fakhry Assaad, director of communicable disease for the World Health Organisation. 'There must be special factors responsible for its spread in Africa but we don't know what they are.'

A special WHO conference on the African AIDS crisis is to be held in October, though scientists face difficulties in collecting accurate information.

Those countries affected — Zaire, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Congo, Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania — will release little information because they fear their crucial dollar-earning tourist industries could be badly affected. Nevertheless, European scientists are piecing together a disturbing picture of widespread heterosexual trans-

mission of AIDS in Africa.

One striking example of transmission from woman to man, and then from man to woman, was provided at the Cairo conference by Dr Nathan Clumeck, head of infectious diseases at the Brussels St Pierre Hospital.

The case involved a wealthy 46-year-old Zairean man who died of AIDS in 1982. He contracted the disease from a Zairean female prostitute, who also died of the disease. Before his death, he passed the disease to four other women. All subsequently died of AIDS.

'From these cases, it is clear normal sexual contact is involved in the transmission of AIDS,' added Dr Clumeck.

According to Dr Clumeck, many female AIDS patients in both Zaire and Rwanda, were prostitutes or had promiscuous husbands. One study of 33 Rwandan prostitutes revealed that 80 per cent had full-blown

AIDS, or related conditions.

This suggests the AIDS virus spreads as easily via heterosexual as through homosexual contacts or other conditions involving contamination of blood.

In the Zairean capital of Kinshasa, the disease's African epicentre, almost 2,000 cases of AIDS have confirmed.

'I certainly think AIDS is spread through normal heterosexual contacts, though we should be careful in interpreting data from Africa,' said Dr Tony Pinching, of the immunology department, St Mary's Hospital, London. 'Poor medical care, particularly infected syringe needles, may also be involved in the disease's spread.'

'Nevertheless, AIDS is undoubtedly going to be a world problem for both homosexuals and heterosexuals. A lot of people have got the idea that AIDS is only a gay disease and think they are protected. That is not the case.'

Dr Pinching also rejected the argument that European gays and African heterosexuals were especially at risk because their promiscuous lifestyles, or their lack of proper nutrition, left them immunologically deficient and open to infection.

'There is little scientific validity for this. It is purely a matter of numbers of sexual contacts. The more you have the more you are likely to get AIDS.'

He and other scientists warn that there is little chance that a vaccine to counter AIDS will be developed for at least five years. The West's best hope is to begin a calm but urgent health education campaign.

However, Professor Robin Weiss, of London's Institute of Cancer Research, stressed that care should be taken in drawing parallels between African and other heterosexual AIDS victims.

The virus may be passed in the same way, but different levels of malnutrition, or infection from other diseases, mean the disease could take effect much more rapidly in Africans. He did acknowledge that AIDS was likely to become a serious global problem.

'I think AIDS may well become a major disease of the twentieth century for both homosexuals and heterosexuals,' he said.