

## AIDS: Africa faces a gloomy future

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**T**HE NUMBER of Africans who will die of AIDS will escalate long before scientists in the West know more about how to fight the virus that causes the disease. According to a report\* published this week, up to a quarter of young, educated people in parts of central Africa are already infected with the virus. The report, by the Panos Institute, which monitors the Third World, and the Norwegian Red Cross, says that AIDS could kill half the population in some African countries.

Panos's numbers are based on the prediction that everyone who is infected with the virus, known as the human immunodeficiency virus, will eventually develop AIDS and die. The US's National Academy of Sciences does not agree, however. The academy recently estimated that between 25 per cent and 50 per cent of those who are infected with the virus will develop AIDS. There is little dispute that almost all who do develop AIDS eventually die.

John Ward, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, said that Panos's estimate is "totally speculation". The CDC estimates that between 17 and 30 per cent of those infected with the virus go on to develop full-blown AIDS. "But no one disputes the notion that Africa is going to have a significant problem," Ward says. The CDC estimates that about 7 per cent of central Africa's population is now infected with the virus, which is transmitted there predominantly through heterosexual contact.

Jon Tinker, the director of Panos, says that about 12 virologists who are knowledgeable about the AIDS virus told Panos that the rate of conversion will grow to 100 per cent. "They are quite emphatic about that," Tinker told *New Scientist*. He said the virologists declined to say this in public because the evidence is not strong enough to publish in scientific papers, and because such a statement would crush the hopes of the millions of people who know they are infected.

Panos's report says that the AIDS virus is very similar to lentiviruses, slow-acting viruses that can take up to 20 years to cause disease, which is then almost always fatal. The AIDS virus appeared about six years ago, and the full number of infected people is still unknown.

Africa is suffering the worst effects of the disease. The spread of AIDS on the continent does not follow the pattern in the West. Unlike the West, AIDS does not spread primarily as a result of homosexual contact or by sharing hypodermic needles. Few countries screen blood supplies for the virus, although several are preparing to do so, Tinker says.



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Africans call AIDS "slim disease": it wastes people to death

In central and east Africa, epidemiologists found that 0.75 per cent of the population is being infected every year. In central Africa, this means that each year there are between 550 to 1000 new cases of AIDS per million adults. Several studies found that from 1 to 18 per cent of healthy blood donors and pregnant women, and from 27 to 88 per cent of female prostitutes, have antibodies to the AIDS virus, the sign of being infected.

In Africa, AIDS is often characterised by "slim disease", where people suffer from

chronic diarrhoea, and by infections such as tuberculosis or cryptococcosis, a fungus that invades the central nervous system. Symptoms appear more often in the gastrointestinal system or the skin, while in the West the first symptoms usually occur in the lymphatic system or the lungs. A form of pneumonia known as pneumocystis carinii affects 63 per cent of European AIDS patients. But only 14 per cent of Africans with AIDS living in Europe have contracted pneumocystis.

The disease, according to a team of scientists writing in last week's issue of *Science*, "is being increasingly detected in areas of Africa previously thought to be free of infection". They say, however, that this may be due to a greater awareness of the disease in those areas.

Men and women in Africa are infected in equal numbers. In Europe and the US, there are 16 times more men infected than women. Further analysis shows, however, that those Africans who contract the disease between the ages of 20 to 29 are predominantly female. A survey in Kinshasha, the capital of Zaire, found 417 new cases among women of that age, and 155 cases among men of the same age. In one

group of female prostitutes tested in Nairobi, Kenya between 1985 and 1986, almost 60 per cent had antibodies against the virus.

African women with AIDS are more likely to be single than men with the disease—61 per cent versus 36 per cent. Nearly one-third of the married AIDS patients had previous sexual liaisons.

One survey found patients with AIDS had more heterosexual partners than people without AIDS.

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