Expert Warns of Ominous Signs in AIDS Fight

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LOS ANGELES — The number of Americans diagnosed with AIDS is now approaching the 1 million mark, with more than a half-million deaths since the epidemic began and 17,000 more people dying of the disease each year, Dr. Harold Jaffe said during a plenary session at the 14th Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections.

That mortality—58 per million—is "twice as high as any country in the European Union and 10 times as high as in the United Kingdom," said Dr. Jaffe, former director of HIV prevention for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and currently head of the department of public health at Oxford University, England.

A troubling jump in incidence in 2005, the latest year for which data are available points to the critical need for community leadership, personal responsibility, and support of preventive efforts proven to work, he said.

"The need for treatment is critical, but I agree with my colleague Dr. Kevin De Cock [WHO director of HIV/AIDS] that we are not going to be able to treat our way out of this epidemic."

"I guess it seems obvious that we should be implementing what works, evaluating what might work, and stop trying to do what doesn't work," added Dr. Jaffe, who singled out federal funding for abstinence-only education as an example of a strategy based on beliefs rather than science.

A "very comprehensive" study in press in the Cochrane Review, for example, reviewed eight published randomized controlled trials of abstinence-only programs, compared with standard sex education or safe-sex programs, involving 13,191 American youths.

With a median follow-up of 12 months, none of the abstinence-only programs demonstrated a significant decline in self-reported sexual activity or any biological outcome such as pregnancy or diagnosis with a sexually transmitted disease (STD), compared with the other approaches, said Dr. Jaffe at the conference, sponsored by the Foundation for Retrovirology and Human Health.

A recent University of Pennsylvania study of 662 African American children (median age, 12 years) did show significantly less sexual activity among those receiving abstinence-only education, compared with those exposed to other interventions; even so, nearly a third of the virgins in the abstinence-only group became sexually active over the course of the 2-year study.

Dr. Jaffe said it cannot be entirely ruled out that abstinence-only education could benefit "very specific groups," but the preponderance of evidence suggests it is not efficacious.

By contrast, he pointed to condom promotion, shown to be "highly efficacious" in preventing HIV transmission, and needle- and syringe-exchange programs, which demonstrate at least modest evidence of reducing intermediate-level activities with the capacity to spread HIV, as more effective approaches.

Condom distribution campaigns are currently being opposed by individuals who believe availability will undermine abstinence-only programs.

President Bush's proposed 2007 budget includes $204 million in support of abstinence-only education, while "no administration, Democrat or Republican, has ever put any [federal] money whatsoever into needle-exchange programs in this country, in contrast to many other countries, including the U.K.," Dr. Jaffe said.

Purely behavioral interventions, primarily skill-building sessions aimed at reducing risky activities among high-risk individuals, are highly significantly efficacious in reducing unprotected sex and acquiring STDs, he said.

Finally, HIV testing by itself is a profound risk-reducing strategy, because individuals who learn they have been exposed to the virus sharply reduce behaviors that could lead to transmission to others, he noted.

Public health prevention strategies can go only so far in curbing the epidemic, emphasized Dr. Jaffe, particularly when it comes to sexual behavior change.

However, some indicators suggest that resources must be quickly marshaled to stem a rising tide of cases, especially among men who have sex with men and among African Americans and other ethnic minorities. ■