



Independent observer
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REPORT CONFIRMS DECLINE IN THE RATE OF NEW HIV INFECTIONS

New HIV infections in 2008 were 30% lower than they were 12 years ago, according to data just released by UNAIDS and the World Health Organization (WHO). The findings confirm a trend first observed about two years ago.

UNAIDS and WHO state that the spread of HIV “appears to have peaked” in 1996. An estimated 2.7 million new HIV infections occurred in 2008, the same number as in 2007, but well below the 3.5 estimated new infections in 1996. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most heavily affected region, accounting for 71% of all new HIV infections in 2008. But even there, the number of new infections is 15% lower than it was in 2001.

“The good news is that we have evidence that the declines we are seeing are due, at least in part, to HIV prevention,” said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS. “However, the findings also show that prevention programming is often off the mark and that if we do a better job of getting resources and programmes to where they will make most impact, quicker progress can be made and more lives saved.”

The number of people living with HIV continues to grow. In December 2008, an estimated 33.4 million people were living with HIV, compared to 33.0 million in 2007. The reason that this number continues to grow while new infections are declining is that HIV-positive people are living longer, due in large part to expanded antiretroviral (ARV) coverage. UNAIDS and WHO report that the percentage of those needing ARV treatment who actually receive it rose from 7% in 2003 to 42% in 2008, meaning that over half of those in need of treatment are still not receiving it.

According to UNAIDS and WHO, annual HIV-related mortality “appears to have peaked” in 2004, when

2.2 million deaths occurred. The estimated number of AIDS-related deaths in 2008 was 2.0 million.

UNAIDS and WHO say that while the epidemic appears to have stabilized in most regions, prevalence continues to increase in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. “Differences are apparent in all regions,” the two organisations state, “with some national epidemics continuing to expand even as the overall regional HIV incidence stabilizes.” In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, epidemics that were once characterised primarily by transmission among injecting drug users are now increasingly characterised by significant sexual transmission. In parts of Asia, the epidemic is becoming increasingly characterised by significant transmission within heterosexual couples.

UNAIDS and WHO state that AIDS continues to be a major global health priority. “Although important progress has been achieved in preventing new HIV infections and in lowering the annual number of AIDS-related deaths,” the two organisations say, “the number of people living with HIV continues to increase. AIDS-related illnesses remain one of the leading causes of death globally and are projected to continue as a significant global cause of premature mortality in the coming decades.”

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