

Medicine

AIDS virus' spread is twice as high as experts thought

U.N. acknowledges making mistakes

By ROBERT PEAR
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WASHINGTON — Medical experts working for the United Nations say they grossly underestimated the spread of the AIDS virus worldwide, and they now believe that new infections are occurring almost twice as fast as they thought a year ago. Instead of 8,200 new infections a day, they now believe there are 16,000.

The new data, which began circulating yesterday among American officials in Washington and will be issued today in Paris, suggest that 30.6 million people around the world are now living with the virus that causes AIDS. The last estimate, for 1996, was 22.6 million.

Some of the increase results from actual spread of the virus, and some from new methods of collecting data and making estimates, which U.N. officials think give a more accurate picture. The United Nations did not say how much of the increase was attributable to each factor.

The U.N. estimates that 2.3 million people worldwide will die of AIDS this year, an increase of more than 50 percent from an estimate that 1.5 million people died of it in 1996.

Two-thirds of the people infected with the human immunodeficiency virus live in sub-Saharan Africa, and the U.N. experts said the epidemic in that region had been badly underestimated.

Asked about the new estimates, Sandra Thurman, director of the

White House Office of National AIDS Policy, said: "These numbers are so overwhelming that they numb the mind. We knew the numbers would increase. But I was surprised to learn how far off the mark we were in our estimates of how the epidemic is progressing globally."

Gareth Jones, a spokesman for the U.N. Program on HIV/AIDS, said: "New infections are occurring at an alarming rate. In addition, it does appear that previous calculations grossly underestimated the rate of transmission" of the virus.

Yesterday, Jones said: "The older estimates were based on data that came from a small number of countries. It was assumed that one could extrapolate similar rates of transmission for all countries in a particular region, assuming that regional factors would be pretty much the same. It turns out that that assumption was wrong."

For the new estimates, Jones said, "we replaced regional models with separate models constructed for each country."

The United Nations estimates that 1,600 children under 15 are infected with the AIDS virus daily, up from last year's estimate of 1,000 children a day. Moreover, it says, 1,200 children die of AIDS each day, up from the prior estimate of 1,000.

New tables prepared by the World Health Organization show that of the 5.8 million people newly infected with the AIDS virus this year, 4 million are in sub-Saharan Africa, 1.3 million are in South Asia and Southeast Asia, and 30,000 are in Western Europe. The estimated number of new infections in North America this year is 44,000.