

IRISH TIMES 30TH NOVEMBER 90

THE World Health Organisation (WHO), which is organising a World AIDS Day tomorrow, said yesterday that many more women were contracting the disease, due to its increasing propagation through heterosexual contacts.

Dr Michael Merson, director of the Global Programme on AIDS, told a press conference that the theme of women and AIDS had been chosen for World AIDS Day in order to "correct the misperception of the AIDS epidemic as a threat mainly to men."

Dr Merson indicated that between nine and 11 million adults and children throughout the world, including three million women, are currently infected with the HIV virus.

One woman out of 40 in Africa, one out of 500 in South America

Education seen as the best vaccine in the fight against AIDS epidemic

and one out of 700 in North America are seropositive.

According to WHO, 1.3 million cases of AIDS have been declared since the epidemic began in the late 1970s, 300,000 of them among women.

Dr Merson said that heterosexual transmission is responsible for two-thirds of infections in developing countries, and he predicted that the rate would reach between 80 and 90 per cent by the year 2000.

In northern countries, AIDS is no longer the monopoly of homosexuals and intravenous drug users; 10 per cent of those infected are heterosexual, and heterosexual transmission is particularly widespread in urban areas already rife with sexually transmitted diseases.

The result of these developments is that the number and the proportion of infected women will increase, according to Dr Merson. He said that the WHO's effort

against AIDS was concentrated on preventing the infection of women and newborns and achieving increased participation in the fight against AIDS.

Dr Merson asserted that "women's general status, both within the family and in society at large, gives them what might be called a social vulnerability... women have less access to education, information and health services."

In addition, he said, "women

may have little or no voice in sexual decision making. Many find it awkward or even dangerous to ask their husband or partner to keep to safer sex, including the use of a condom."

Asked about prospects for development of an antidote, Dr Marson answered: "We would be lucky if a vaccine was ready at the end of the century," and added that "the best vaccine is education."

He noted that research was

being done on antibodies believed to exist in the blood of women, since only 30 per cent of seropositive mothers transmit the disease to their babies.

Within the coming year, three research centres for the development and testing of vaccines will be set up in the Third World, he said.

He noted that there has been "some success stories" in Africa, where consciousness of the disease, the first step in its pre-

vention, is becoming widespread.

In Zaire, Dr Merson said that 20 million condoms are sold per year, against only one million annually four or five years ago.

In Kenya, despite a large number of contaminated prostitutes, the infection rate among the population has remained between eight and 10 per cent, against 20 to 25 per cent in other countries such as Uganda.

Mr Merson congratulated Uganda for becoming the first African country to institute an AIDS-prevention programme mobilising all of the sectors of the government.

The programme is aimed in part at aiding AIDS "orphans" who already number some 10 million throughout the world. — (AFP)

TOMORROW THE AIDS NIGHTMARE

"At times I've thought I was going mad. I had a nightmare that me and my husband and the kids were locked in a room full of radiation, and we had to watch the kids dying one by one."

This is part of Nuafa's story. She is HIV Positive. So, too, are her four-year-old daughter and young baby.

Tomorrow we look at the plight of women and babies infected with the Aids virus and talk to women who never thought it would happen to them or their families.

THE IRISH TIMES
ON SATURDAY
THE WEEKEND NEWSPAPER

Debate over how early intervention should begin

THERE has been considerable controversy over the effectiveness of early intervention with anti-viral drugs like AZT to extend the lives of people infected with HIV. American researchers have claimed that early intervention is successful, while European researchers have doubted the evidence. However, evidence presented at last June's international AIDS conference in the US was so convincing that "the Europeans were won over", says Dr James Walsh, the Department of Health's AIDS co-ordinator.

Many of the world's leading experts will discuss early intervention at an international medical symposium at the Royal College of Physicians, Kildare Street, Dublin, today.

The symposium, "Early Medical Intervention in Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection", will be addressed by experts from Germany, France, Spain, Italy, the UK, the US, Canada and Tanzania. The keynote speaker will be Dr Robert Gallo, who pioneered the development of diagnostic tests for the AIDS virus, HIV.

Dr Gallo is chief of the laboratory of tumour cell biology



Dr Robert Gallo

at the National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Maryland, in the US. He was one of the first to suspect that AIDS was caused by a retrovirus, and he and Dr Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in France have been jointly credited with first identifying the causative agent, HIV.

Scientists will today be giving accounts of their experiences of early intervention therapies which delay or prevent the onset of AIDS in people who have been infected with HIV. It was discovered by Dr Paul Volgerding,

while working with AZT, an anti-viral drug, in San Francisco, that using the drug early — before symptoms began — could both prolong life and improve the quality of life in people with HIV.

In the future, people could live for 12 to 15 years with the virus, or even longer, as new and better drug therapies are developed, says Dr Walsh.

There is no policy in Ireland as to exactly when early intervention should begin. The criterion in the US for deciding when AZT therapy should begin is when the T4 cell count drops below 500 (the number of T4 cells in the blood indicates the strength of the immune system). European scientists, however, are arguing that therapy should not begin until the count drops to 200, while others say that therapy should begin as soon as the person knows they are positive, no matter what the T4 cell count.

The RCPI decided to hold the conference in order to clear up the confusion.

A public meeting will be held at 7.30 pm this evening, in the RCPI, at which Dr Gallo will speak. The session will be chaired by Dr Walsh.

No events sponsored by Government here

NO SPECIAL Government-sponsored events have been organised for World Aids Day, tomorrow, despite the fact that the World Health Organisation has called on all governments to hold special educational events to highlight the day.

All AIDS Day events are being conducted by voluntary organisations within the umbrella organisation, Dublin AIDS Alliance, on a shoestring budget of £200 which was raised "on the street".

The media officer of Dublin AIDS Alliance, Mr Christy Cleary, said that the Government's response was "tantamount to criminal and moral neglect in relation to the issues of HIV and AIDS within the Irish context."

The only event which the Government has publicised regarding World AIDS Day is a medical conference on early intervention in people with HIV being held today at the Royal College of Physicians. It is sponsored by a pharmaceutical company, ICN.

The company manufactures Ribavirin, an anti-viral drug just introduced to the Irish market. Ireland is the first country in the world to have approved use of the drug in people infected with HIV.

The lack of Government involvement in World AIDS Day follows the defeat by the Dail on Wednesday last of a Fine Gael 'private members' motion calling on the Government to establish a national AIDS task-force. The Government has demonstrated "total complacency in relation to awareness of HIV and AIDS and the support which should be provided", Mr Cleary said.

World AIDS Day around the globe will feature thousands of events organised by governments, voluntary groups and women's organisations. A WHO circular recommended 101 activities for the day, none of which the Government is sponsoring. They include educational activities and cultural events designed to prevent the spread of AIDS, from which three million women and children will die in the 1990s. The theme of World AIDS Day is women and AIDS.

AIDS Day events tomorrow will include a benefit concert at the Olympia Theatre in Dublin, the sale of T-shirts, a fund-raising bed push from Drogheda to Dundalk, street collections and the launch of two booklets on women and children with HIV.

Meanwhile, an assembly of Ministers for Health at the International Conference on the Implications of AIDS for Mothers and Children will today make an official declaration calling on all governments to "assume leadership and to mobilise the necessary resources both human and financial to actively support the prevention and care of HIV infection/AIDS in woman and children".

It will also call on governments to "further develop and implement innovative multi-faceted health education programmes for prevention of HIV infection/AIDS" and to "ensure that families affected by HIV/AIDS have necessary support by health and mobilising health and social services."

Sri Lanka's plans for World AIDS Day include seminars on women and AIDS, newspaper supplement, radio and TV discussions and a commemorative stamp. Denmark's events include a workshop for the media on women and AIDS, regional workshops for women living with HIV/AIDS and an information tent for sex workers and their clients in Copenhagen.

Clash on new AIDS drug

By EUGENE MOLONEY
NATIONAL AIDS co-ordinator Dr. James Walsh yesterday defended Ireland's controversial decision to become the first country to use a new drug for treating the disease, despite calls from top consultants for a more cautious approach.

Health Minister Rory O'Hanlon gave the go-ahead for the drug Ribavirin to be made available to AIDS sufferers following the recommendation of the National Drugs Advisory Board. The board's medical director Dr. Aileen Scott described the drug as being "of good quality, safe and effective."

The Canadian company ICN Pharmaceuticals which makes the drug, says Ribavirin can delay or prevent the onset of AIDS in people

who are HIV positive but have not yet developed the symptoms of AIDS. While both Britain and the United States have licensed the drug for use in treating other viral infections, they have not made it available to AIDS patients.

British specialist Jonathan Weber of St. Mary's Hospital, London, said he was surprised Irish health authorities had given the go-ahead to the drug. "It frequently causes anaemia and this could be a problem. I feel more experiments are needed before it is used."

But Dr. O'Hanlon yesterday told an AIDS symposium in Dublin: "It is our policy to ensure that these new treatments once tested are made available to those suffering from this tragic disease."

£1½m medical costs

Scientists heard yesterday Ireland's HIV positive and AIDS patients are being denied up-to-date treatments because of lack of Government funding.

On the eve of World AIDS day, leading genito-urinary consultant, Dr. Fiona Mulcahy, told an international AIDS symposium that recent major advances could not be applied to the 600 patients in her care until the Department of Health provides necessary equipment and staffing costing £500,000.

This was needed to buy the AZT drug, to set up systems for testing the strength of a patient's immune systems and to buy drugs to prevent a form of pneumonia which is one of the classic symptoms of AIDS.

IRISH INDEPENDENT
DECEMBER 1-1990

Haemophiliac to be shown documents

A HAEMOPHILIAC is to be given access to documents in the possession of the Blood Transfusion Service Board in preparation for a High Court action in which he claims he was given contaminated blood.

An application for discovery of the documents came before the Master of the High Court, Mr. Harry Hill, SC, and there was agreement by the Blood Transfusion Service Board that they would be made available.

The application was by way of a "test" case on behalf of a total of 70 haemophiliacs who are suing the board, the National Drugs Advisory Board and the Minister for Health.

The haemophiliacs allege they were contaminated by HIV and as a result have become infected with HIV and would suffer grievous loss and damage.

Mr Peter Finlay, for the applicant — who was named only as "Murphy" — under a previous agreement to maintain anonymity — asked for reports and minutes of any meetings in relation to the dangers posed by the virus.

The application was also for details of recall procedures and measures taken by the board since 1983 to take out of circulation anti-haemophilia factor (AHV) concentrate which had been supplied to "Mr Murphy".

EDITORIAL

THE IRISH TIMES

13 D'OLIER STREET, DUBLIN 2
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 1, 1990

AIDS DAY

Today is World AIDS Day, designated by the World Health Organisation to encourage both voluntary organisations and governments to make a special effort to bring home to people all over the world the truly frightening facts about the spread of this lethal disease, the consequences for those who may contact it and the best means of preventing its further spread. In countries around the world, state and voluntary agencies are promoting special programmes to provide information on this year's theme — "Women and AIDS".

In this country, the involvement of the State is conspicuous by its absence, save for a contribution by the Minister for Health to a conference organised by the Royal College of Physicians and funded by a pharmaceutical company. Documents from the WHO have been arriving in Dublin newspaper offices for weeks past in preparation for today. From the Department of Health there has not been so much as a single press release, never mind any kind of active educational campaign directed towards the public.

It is as if, for the Minister, AIDS is not a problem in Ireland. Only two days ago he told the Dail that he was satisfied that there were adequate outlets for the sale of condoms in this country. The previous day the Government had defeated a proposal to establish a special task force on AIDS. Whatever about the need for a task force (there is good reason to respect the expertise and endeavour of staff within the Department and the health services) there is no doubt in most expert minds of the need for a readier availability of condoms — particularly to enable some women at risk to protect themselves against infection. It is as if the Minister were somehow removed from the real world in which the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is being spread.

* * *

Articles elsewhere in this newspaper provide some information on the impact of AIDS on women and children in this country, and data on the current extent of infection by HIV. It is important to realise that these data offer only a snapshot of what was the extent of infection between five and fifteen years ago. Because of the long incubation period between infection and the appearance of the symptoms of AIDS, it should be evident that the real spread of the disease is vastly greater than is reflected in the current data.

The number of people of both sexes carrying HIV, most of them not knowing that they may be transmitting the virus to others, is probably several thousand already. There is some evidence to indicate that many affected persons do not know they have the virus until they develop the symptoms of full-blown AIDS, by which time they may well have infected many others. Yet the Government and the Minister continue to preserve an almost monastic silence in terms of general public education.

There is reason to believe that school teachers, at least, are becoming aware of the need for preventive education and are utilising the services of the Department's Health Promotion Unit to equip themselves to teach their pupils about HIV and AIDS. This is welcome and much to be encouraged, but it will do little in the short term to curtail the spread of HIV from the large and growing pool of those already infected.

As to the treatment and management of both HIV carriers and AIDS sufferers, almost every professional who speaks publicly on the subject indicates that not enough resources are being made available — not enough expert treatment centres, insufficient community care, grossly inadequate numbers of trained counsellors, and much still being left to under-funded voluntary agencies.

On World AIDS Day, 1990, Dr O'Hanlon and his Government colleagues should realise that this is not good enough. They should face the real world.

IRISH TIMES 1/DECEMBER 1990

AIDS is increasingly a women's problem, whether they become infected with HIV heterosexually or have to care for loved ones with the virus, reports Health Correspondent **Kathryn Holmquist**

Women now at the frontline of the HIV attack

AIDS IS a women's problem. It can no longer be comfortably dismissed as the "gay plague" or a syndrome relevant only to intravenous drug abusers or haemophiliacs infected with contaminated blood products.

By the year 2000, 3.5 million women and children will have died of AIDS, the World Health Organisation predicts. As many women as men worldwide will be infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), which can survive for eight and possibly 18 years in the body before causing the illnesses associated with AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

So many children have been and will be infected, that the infant mortality rate in major European cities will rise by 30 per cent.

AIDS is pandemic and HIV infection has been spreading through heterosexual contact throughout the world since the 1980s. There are three million women of child-bearing age already infected as of 1990, 80 per cent of them in sub-Saharan Africa. The heterosexual part of the epidemic started later in Ireland and the rest of Western Europe — in the

early 1980s as opposed to the 1970s in Africa — but AIDS has already become the leading cause of death for women aged 20-40 in major cities in the Americas and Western Europe.

The WHO's estimate of 3.5 million deaths of women and children due to AIDS in the 1990s is based on the statistical evidence that 500,000 women and children were infected with HIV during the 1980s. An additional three million women and children will become infected and die of AIDS in the next 10 years, the WHO has projected.

In Ireland, an estimated 10,000 people will have developed AIDS — half of them women and children — if the number of AIDS cases (174) keeps doubling every 18 months. Most of those Irish who have been infected with HIV, as in the rest of the world, still do not know they are carrying the AIDS virus because they have never been tested and are yet to be hospitalised with the symptoms of AIDS.

Many Irish women will be affected by AIDS, either because they have the virus themselves, or because they will play a crucial role as the carers

of others with HIV. Thousands of Irish women are already the mothers, partners, wives, lovers, sisters and daughters of the 1,005 people known to be infected with HIV — the true figure could be several thousand. Women are also the volunteers, medical personnel and social workers who live with AIDS every day.

But more and more Irish women are themselves infected with HIV and 20 women have developed AIDS, according to information from the genito-urinary department at St James's Hospital, Dublin. That means that 11.5 per cent of Ireland's 174 AIDS cases are women — higher than the US rate of 10 per cent.

Women are twice as likely as men to be infected with the AIDS virus as the result of heterosexual intercourse. Irish women have already been infected by men they have dated. While the majority of the women infected with HIV attending St James's genito-urinary department caught the virus through drug use, 15 per cent were infected through heterosexual intercourse.

In Ireland, as in the rest of Western Europe, the virus has been infiltrating

the heterosexual population since 1983, when it was first discovered among intravenous drug abusers. They spread the virus among each other by sharing needles — an extremely efficient way of contaminating another human being. Some spread it to their children.

The Department of Health knows of 75 babies infected with the virus.

‘Many Irish women still feel AIDS will never touch their lives.’

but as paediatrician, Dr Elisabeth Griffin and virologist, Dr Irene Hillery of the Virus Reference Laboratory at University College, Dublin, have both said, there are more infected children in the community that have not yet had an HIV test.

Nine people — most of them women — are known to have died from AIDS after acquiring the virus through heterosexual contact.

The genito-urinary clinic at St James's Hospital is aware of 18 women who were infected with HIV through heterosexual contact alone. Some of these women had no idea that the men who gave them the virus were infected — and some of the men did not know either.

The Department of Health knows of a total of 83 people infected with HIV through heterosexual or "unspecified" contact — meaning that they were not in the risk groups of IV drug abusers; babies of IV drug abusers or their partners; homosexuals/bisexuals infected through sexual activity or haemophiliacs infected by contaminated blood products.

The silence about how Irish women are being affected by AIDS is ominous for anyone who knows the inexorable progress of the virus in other countries. Because AIDS is still most obvious among the urban poor in areas where drug abuse was rampant and among homosexual/bisexual men, many Irish women still feel protected and believe that the AIDS pandemic has been exaggerated and will never touch their lives.

Those dealing with AIDS daily believe that more must be done to slow down the spread of infection. The Women and AIDS group is concerned that women are not being properly educated in safer sex.

The Women and AIDS group was set up in 1986 because, says Ruth O'Rourke, "there was no information aimed at women, and women weren't picking up on the services available. So the services became tailored to men's needs, and when women did come along, they felt out of place."

People who test positive need counselling to help them cope first with the psychological trauma, then with the problem of how not to spread the infection, safe sex and the problems they may have with relationships. Social workers are concerned, however, that HIV-positive women, and the HIV-positive men who are spreading the virus to women, are not getting the counselling they need because of a lack of Department of Health funding.

No time to counsel means that the person is more likely to deny the fact that they are HIV-positive and continue to engage in risky behaviour,

one of the social workers said.

At St James's Hospital, 10,000 people attend the sexually-transmitted diseases clinic annually, yet there are only three social workers/counsellors to handle the problem, two of them funded by the National Lottery.

If these HIV-positive and sexually-active young people are not counselled appropriately so that they learn how not to spread the virus, all of us will eventually pay the price as the virus spreads from them to us.

Meanwhile, men may be picking up the virus from prostitutes, who report being offered extra money for sex without a condom.

Rarely, brave women speak out. Like "Nuala" — a woman who was not in a risk group and is unsure how she was infected with HIV — and Mary Carthy, a mother who nursed her son at home as he died of AIDS.

It is likely, if you are a woman, that AIDS will become a part of your life — one way or another — in the next decade. It is not a "gay disease" or a scourge confined to the lower socio-economic groups, as the women in the articles printed here today will tell you.

Scared AIDS victims seek help abroad

THE FEAR of identification as an AIDS victim is distorting the true picture of the extent of the problem in this country.

Many Irish HIV and AIDS victims are turning up for advice and treatment in Britain, according to the new chief executive of the Terrence Higgins Trust, the biggest AIDS aid agency in Europe.

"Irish problems often get exported," says Naomi Wayne, "and we are seeing quite a lot of Irish people here — some of them already resident in Britain but others who travel specifically to avail of our services. Certainly many Irish gay men find it easier to come to us than look for help at home."

Ms Wayne reckons that their attraction to Irish people seeking advice and guidance is the better chance of absolute confidentiality. "Ireland is a small place, while London is a big anonymous city where there is less chance of bumping into someone you know. Irish people probably feel more comfortable coming to us."

Studied law

Naomi Wayne, who took up her position with the Trust six weeks ago, is well known in Ireland. Born in North London of a Jewish Lithuanian background she studied law at the London School of Economics and at Cambridge University, but took up her first job in this country.

BY DES NIX



■ Naomi Wayne . . . chief executive Terrence Higgins Trust

Encouraged by an Irish tutor and Irish friends, she came to Dublin as education officer for the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1974, and became an expert in the application of Irish labour law. She wrote a book on the subject, "Labour Law in Ireland" in 1980 which is considered a definitive work in its field.

Union tutor

She is remembered in Dublin as an outstanding tutor by the Transport Union and as an invaluable

contributor to the preparation of many equal pay claims for women in the workforce.

And she has fond memories of her own of the whole experience. "It's extraordinary to look back," she says. "I was 23, English, middle class and all I knew about Ireland when I arrived there was home rule from O-level history. The job was about teaching people how to stand up for themselves. To start with I could not understand a word anyone said. They were incredibly nice to me."

After five and a half years teaching trade unionists how to organise themselves, she left to take up a position with the Northern Ireland Equal Opportunities Commission, and became enforcements officer in a newly created enforcements department. Her work at one end of the scale resulted in compensation via the European Court for women members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary whose contracts had been terminated and, at the other, in a decision that it was unfair to prevent schoolboys from wearing ear-rings when girls could.

Equal pay

But the campaign from that era which gives her the greatest satisfaction was the acquisition of equal pay and domestic sanitation, gas and electricity for the women who operated level crossings for nominal pay and a substandard cottage. "Up to then it had been cheaper to keep the women than instal automatic gates," she remembers. "They were known to the N.I.R. as 'cheap women crossings' and it was the only equal pay claim ever where people got sanitation and electricity built into an award".

Six years later, Naomi is head of the biggest single AIDS aid agency in Europe, an organisation which employs 60 people, co-ordinated 300 buddies (befrienders) and 500 other volunteers, and deals with two people a minute phoning for help and advice.

Govt. denies AIDS inaction

From JOHN DOWNING
in Brussels

HEALTH MINISTER, Rory O'Hanlon last night rejected accusations of Government inaction on World AIDS Day.

The Minister said that such criticisms were "ill-founded" and that many European governments did not take a very active role in the international day last Saturday.

Dr. O'Hanlon said following discussions by EC health ministers in Brussels, he found the Irish record of action "compared very well". He pointed out that the Government had taken two major steps recently in the fight against AIDS. A special schools programme was introduced by the Education Minister Mary O'Rourke and a new information booklet was also published.

"We could have held these for December 1, for

World AIDS Day. But that's not the way responsible governments should operate. We released these items as soon as they were ready", he said.

The Minister said he was interested by an EC suggestion that special self-destructing syringes be introduced. These would effectively end the prospect of needles being re-used, which is a major cause in the spread of AIDS.

"We are very interested in it — but you have to evaluate it very carefully as it would mean changing totally the current system. Obviously, there would be little point in introducing this on a limited basis," Dr. O'Hanlon said.

The Minister also pointed out that the Government had organised a special symposium on early intervention in the AIDS problem. This was designed to complement World AIDS Day.

06/11/77 JRC/RECEIVED 4/12/90



Dr. O'Hanlon

Free needles to cut Aids?

HEALTH MINISTER Dr. Rory O'Hanlon last night defended the Government's handling of Aids in Ireland.

And he revealed that the Government is considering the introduction of "use once" syringes to halt the spread of Aids among drug abusers who currently share needles.

Dr. O'Hanlon rejected criticism of the Government's failure to organise an official programme of activities for World Aids Day last Saturday as "badly based". He added that the Government had organised a world symposium on Aids last week.

Few EC governments had organised official activities to mark the day, said Dr. O'Hanlon.

He was "fully satisfied" that what the Government was doing for Aids prevention and awareness "compares favourably" with what is being done in the rest of the EC, citing the schools' Aids education programme and the recent launch of an Aids information booklet.

He said that the Government "would be very interested in the introduction of once only needles" but added that replacing the current system of disposable needles in hospitals would be a major change and would have to be studied carefully.

THE STAR 4/DECEMBER/90