

Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA):

Understanding AIDS

Forty-two million people globally are HIV-positive. Thirty million live in Sub-Saharan Africa, six million in South and South-East Asia, one million in East Asia and in the Pacific, one and a half million in Latin America, one million in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Five million individuals were newly infected in 2002. Fourteen million children have been orphaned by AIDS since the beginning of the epidemic.

What Is AIDS, and How Do You Get It?

AIDS (or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) is the result of infection with the human immune-deficiency virus (HIV), and also the result of other “opportunistic” infections which invade the body as a result of its diminished capacity for resistance. HIV is passed on through bodily fluids, the most common avenues for transmission today being sexual intercourse with an infected partner, shared needles used for drug-injecting, and transmission from mother to child during pregnancy or breast-feeding.

In Europe and North America, the earliest cases were identified among male homosexuals, and in these parts of the world HIV was originally thought of as the “gay disease.” In Africa and Asia, the overwhelming majority of infections take place as a result of sexual intercourse between heterosexual women and men. In global terms, the ratio of women to men infected is now 47/53, with the fastest rate of increase occurring in women between the ages of 19 and 25.

What Happens When You Become Infected with HIV?

HIV is not like malaria or meningitis, which have distinctive symptoms and for which treatments are available. HIV gradually destroys the body’s immune system and makes the individual progressively more and more vulnerable to other infections.

A person with HIV may be well for many years, then begin to suffer from skin complaints, chest infections, diarrhoea and other problems. Eventually, illnesses become more and more frequent, weight loss becomes impossible to ignore, it becomes increasingly difficult to live a normal life, and the person will be described as suffering from AIDS.

Can You Cure HIV/AIDS?

There is currently no cure for HIV, although there are medications which can prolong the period of ‘normal’ healthy life. In addition, there is plenty of evidence

that good nutrition, a reasonable quality of life, a positive attitude and belonging to a supportive community can delay the onset of symptoms and mitigate their severity. Good basic health care is crucial, backed up by the availability of standard treatments for opportunistic infections.

Conversely, poverty, malnutrition and hopelessness can hasten the progress of the disease, while frequent attacks of illness are debilitating, and in situations where adequate primary health care is not available, they may prove fatal. In Europe and North America, where health care is adequate and drugs available for treating HIV itself, it has been observed that HIV is no longer a terminal condition. In the developing world, where 95% of all HIV-infected people live, good nutrition and effective primary health services are an impossible dream for the vast majority of the people.

Is There Any Treatment for HIV/AIDS?

People with HIV are reliant on the availability of treatments for opportunistic infections like pneumonia and tuberculosis. In addition, most HIV-positive people in Europe today have access to specialist combination therapies which enable them to live normal lives by delaying the breakdown of the immune system.

The problem is that these therapies remain expensive and so are less relevant in the developing world, where basic painkillers, antibiotics and diarrhoea drugs may be unavailable, and lack of continuity in the supply of medicines to treat tuberculosis is leading to an alarming increase in the incidence of drug-resistant tuberculosis.

What Are the Elements in the Problem?

One of the most striking things about the HIV epidemic is that the current situation has developed out of a phenomenon which was generally recognised as recently as the early eighties. The size of the problem is demonstrated by the absolute numbers living or dying from HIV/AIDS; by the percentage of young adults affected in different places; by the number of unsupported survivors, who include elderly parents and grandparents as well as orphaned children; and by the economic effects of the loss of productive people. Its urgency is demonstrated by the rapid increase in the number of infections in all but a very few countries in the developing world.