

HIV spreading in Europe, but AIDS cases declining: study

November 30 2011, by Igor Gedilaghine

HIV infections continued to rise in Europe in 2010, but thanks to treatment the number of cases of full-blown AIDS has dramatically declined in recent years, according to a report published Wednesday.

"The new data raises concern about the continuing transmission of HIV in Europe," the World Health Organisation's Europe office and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) said in their joint report, published a day before World AIDS Day.

Last year, 27,116 new cases of HIV infections were reported in the European Union and European Economic Area, which is an increase of around four percent from 2009, according to the report, which stressed that statistics from Austria and Liechtenstein had not been accessible.

"In contrast, the steady decrease of AIDS cases continued in 2010 with 4,666 reported cases in the EU/EEA region," it said, pointing out that this was a drop of almost 50 percent from 2004 and stressing the importance of early HIV detection for reining in the AIDS epidemic.

According to a United Nations report published last week, a record 34 million people worldwide lived with HIV last year, while improved treatment has meant that the number of AIDS-linked deaths has steadily dropped from a peak of 2.2 million in 2005 to 1.8 million last year.

According to that report, about half of those eligible for treatment are now receiving it, something that saved the lives of 700,000 people in

2010.

"We need to demonstrate the political courage to focus on key populations most affected by HIV and to address the issue of late diagnosis of HIV infection which often leads to delayed treatment and higher rates of AIDS-related morbidity and mortality," ECDC chief Marc Sprenger said in a statement issued by the Stockholm-based EU agency.

ECDC and WHO researchers noted that "HIV epidemics are remarkably distinct in individual countries but overall, HIV continues to disproportionately affect certain key populations."

According to the report, HIV in Europe is still mainly transmitted through sex between men, while in cases of heterosexual contact, about one third of the reported cases originates with people from countries facing general epidemics of the virus.

People who inject drugs and people who are not aware that they carry the disease make up the biggest threat of transmission, according to the report.

The head of WHO Europe, Zsuzsanna Jakab, stressed the importance of creating "tailored responses" to HIV epidemics for different areas, since the characteristics can differ significantly.

Sprenger agreed, insisting that "only the knowledge of the characteristics of the epidemic in specific regions allows for effective responses" against the spread of the disease.

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