

AIDS crisis in Papua New Guinea

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A report issued this year by the Papua New Guinea Health Department has revealed that the number of HIV/AIDS sufferers in the country has reached record levels.

Last year there were 642 new cases, almost double the 342 cases recorded in 1997, with another 185 cases in the first four months of this year. The Health Department estimates that for every infection, 10 go unreported. So the total number infected with the virus in PNG is 17,410, in a country with only 4.4 million people. This means that one in every 253.5 people in PNG are infected.

Since 1987, when the first case was reported in PNG, the disease has claimed the lives of over 2,200 and orphaned more than 1,300 children.

The majority of AIDS victims are in Port Moresby, the PNG capital, with 20-39 year-olds making up 38 percent of all cases. There is no data available on AIDS infection in PNG's rural regions but the virus has moved to outlying areas as youth and rural poor, who came to the city in search of work, contract the disease and unknowingly spread the infection when they return to the countryside.

Like other under-developed countries, the AIDS crisis is exacerbated by the lack of basic health and social facilities, and medicines.

PNG has only one doctor for every 5,382 people and one nurse for every 998 people. Five percent of the population has no access to any health care. Life expectancy is 54 years and the infant mortality rate is 77 per 1000 live births, the highest in the Pacific region. Only 20 percent of women have access to a healthcare worker during childbirth. The mortality rate for children under 5 years is 100 per 1,000 live births.

Only 28 percent of the population has access to safe water and only 22 percent has adequate sanitation. As a result, Pacific Human Development Report 1999 estimates that around 174,800 people in PNG suffer

from diarrhea, which is now the second highest cause of illness.

In other words, PNG, which spends a miniscule \$119 million on health per year and is under constant pressure from international banks to cut its social expenditure, cannot provide a basic health service, let alone treat AIDS victims, who are forced to suffer in the grimmest circumstances.

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UNAIDS has estimated that worldwide 1,600 babies are born with HIV everyday, having contracted the virus from their infected mothers. Despite this, in 1996, nine years after PNG's first reported AIDS infection, only 30-40 percent of the country's antenatal clinics were equipped with HIV testing facilities.

Reports by Australian-based AusAID indicate that preventative education programs are in place and 13 HIV testing clinics are planned. These measures are entirely inadequate and do little to assist those who have contracted the disease.

Although the risk of cross infection can be reduced by up to 50 percent by using a combination of AZT-DDI AIDS drugs, the cost of treatment is US\$100 per month and way out of reach of the majority of PNG's AIDS sufferers.

Basic communication and transport facilities are so poor in PNG that news about the tsunami, or giant tidal wave, which hit the country's north coast killing over 2,000 people last year, took 24 hours to reach Port Moresby and the outside world. The devastated area is only accessible by four-wheel drive vehicle, boat or on foot. The first information about the disaster was relayed via two-way radio. With such primitive conditions prevailing throughout most of PNG what chance do those with suffering from HIV/AIDS have?



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