

MEDICAL UPDATE

HIV Conference Tackles AIDS Epidemic's New Realities

by *Ronald O. Valdiserri, MD, MPH, and M. Valerie Mills, PhD, MSW*

(NAPSA)—Recently, researchers, public health experts, and members of the AIDS community gathered in Atlanta for the 2003 National HIV Prevention Conference. Their objective was one we can all get behind: stopping the spread of HIV in our communities.

The AIDS epidemic has changed dramatically in the past two decades, leading to a host of new challenges. What have not changed are risky sexual behavior, the deadly synergy between substance use and HIV, and the need for strategies to prevent HIV infection. These are the very reasons this conference was established.

Today, there are between 850,000 and 950,000 Americans living with HIV—more than ever before. About a quarter of them do not know they are infected, and are missing out on treatments that could help them stay healthy and live longer. They may also be unknowingly passing the virus to their partners.

Increased HIV testing is needed to help these individuals learn of their infection. In fact, attendees at the conference examined the latest research on how to

provide fast, convenient HIV testing to people who need it. One promising option is a new rapid HIV test, which can provide preliminary results in less than 30 minutes.

For people who already know they are infected, efforts to help them protect their partners are essential.

Some of the most important research at the conference focuses on this challenge. For example, experts discussed programs to help doctors talk about safer sex with their HIV-infected patients.

Communities at high risk for HIV infection were also a major focus of the conference. AIDS is hitting communities of color harder than ever before.

Many people in these communities face unique challenges that increase their risk of infection, including poverty, discrimination and limited access to health care.

Studies at the conference addressing HIV among these and other vulnerable populations discussed awareness of HIV treatments among people of color, the role of the Internet in risky behavior among gay and bisexual men, and the link between substance abuse and high-risk sexual behavior among youth.

HIV prevention programs need to be tailored to meet the special needs of these communities. Several studies at the conference shed new light on the challenges they face in stopping the spread of HIV, while other studies highlight ways to overcome those challenges.

Four years ago, the first National HIV Prevention Conference helped create new awareness about the continuing toll of HIV in the United States.

Since then, tremendous efforts have been made to revitalize HIV prevention. As co-chairs of this year's conference, we are confident that its impact will again be felt for years to come.

To get more information on HIV and AIDS, call CDC's National AIDS Hotline at 1-800-342-AIDS or visit www.cdcnpin.org.

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Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of two articles. The second, soon-to-be-released article will report on noteworthy conference findings.