

# AIDS in Mexico

**Fifty percent of the known cases have been reported in Mexico City, but the disease has also been diagnosed in just about every state in the Nation**

By June of this year, five hundred cases of AIDS had been reported in Mexico. The first was identified in 1983 and today the disease is spreading at an alarming rate that doubles every seven and a half months.

Brazil with its 1,700 cases and Mexico are the Latin American countries with the most AIDS victims, while Haiti has a high number in relation to its population, 800 out of a population of 5.5 million.

Over the last year more countries from all over the world have reported greater numbers of people suffering from the disease. In March 1986, 83 countries had notified 21,733 cases to the World Health Organization (WHO), while by June 1987, 113 countries had reported over 50,000 cases. Yet these 50,000 AIDS victims are only the tip of the iceberg, for according to experts from WHO and the Pan American Health Organization, anywhere from five to ten million people throughout the world carry the AIDS virus.

Experts predict that anywhere between half a million and three million people will develop the syndrome over the next five years, and will probably die from it.

"If a group of infectologists, epidemiologists, molecular biologists, immunologists and virologists had gotten together to design a di-

abolic mechanism to use against humanity, I believe that inspiration would have led them to the problem we have today": Dr. Guillermo Soberón, Mexican Secretary of Health.

## Groups at Risk

This year the Mexican Department of Health launched a public information

## Several institutions provide health care for AIDS victims in Mexico.

campaign on AIDS, and in June Health Secretary Guillermo Soberón and his men met with officials from WHO and the Pan American Health Organization for a public symposium on the subject. During the event the Director General of Epidemiology in Mexico, Dr. Jaime Sepúlveda Amor, said that the campaign and the information about the ways the virus can be transmitted and the means of avoiding infection, as well as its advice on "safe sex", offended some people who accused the government of "invading family morals and promoting promiscuity." But at the same time, Dr. Sepúlveda stated, other groups complain that the government is

not doing enough or that it is promoting the persecution of certain (high-risk) groups.

The Mexican press recently published reports of discriminatory practices against homosexuals and prostitutes in the states of Campeche, Veracruz and Yucatan, despite the fact that Dr. Soberón has repeatedly condemned discrimination against these and other high-risk groups. Dr. Sepúlveda pointed out during the symposium that "the virus has no sexual preference." In defense of his Department's campaign, Dr. Soberón said that "if it's a sexually transmitted disease we have to talk about sex using direct language."

According to information given out during the symposium, the first AIDS victims in Mexico have been mostly homosexual and bisexual males, who account for 90% of the reported cases. Another 5% of the victims were infected through blood transfusions, while only one percent were intravenous drug users. So far, there are fewer women than men with AIDS in Mexico, with 23 male victims for every female one.

This is in sharp contrast to the situation in Haiti and Africa, where transmission is believed to be through heterosexual contact and AIDS strikes both men and women alike.

At the symposium Dr. Sepúlveda told the audience that one third of Mexico's AIDS patients have already died, another third is still receiving medical care while contact has been lost with the remaining third. The National Nutrition Institute has cared for 84 AIDS patients over the last three years, 95% of whom were homosexual males. Out of these, 65% have since died, said Dr. Samuel Ponce de León, head of research at the Institute's

Infectology Department.

Several Mexican institutions provide medical care for AIDS victims. The Social Security Institute (IMSS) has attended 46% of the diagnosed cases, especially at its La Raza Hospital in Mexico City. Hospitals belonging to the Department of Health have provided care for another 37% of the patients in centers such as the Nutrition Institute, the Institute for Respiratory Diseases and the Mexico City General Hospital. The Social Security Institute for State Workers (ISSSTE) has dealt with 9% of the cases, while private hospitals have cared for 7% of known AIDS victims.

Through blood tests doctors have been able to observe that people who sell their blood are a high risk group since many have antibodies to the AIDS virus in their blood in a proportion ten times greater than is the case for altruistic blood donors. As a result, the government has now forbidden buying and selling blood and is currently setting up a system which will include screening for AIDS in all blood tests, transfusions and blood banks throughout the country. Health officials have also performed blood tests among prostitutes in Tijuana and Acapulco, and found no antibodies to the virus in their blood.

Fifty percent of AIDS cases in Mexico have been reported in Mexico City, although the disease has also been di-



Several Mexican institutions have launched an intense preventive campaign against AIDS.

Photo by Antonio Ortúño

## What Is Being Done About AIDS

The government declared AIDS an immediately notifiable disease and established an Information Center in Mexico City. Blood tests are available for high-risk groups, and all blood transfusions are subject to new screening. The educational campaign includes a monthly bulletin for the general public and courses for medical personnel about treating AIDS patients.

Individuals and groups are organizing as well. During a demonstration homosexuals held at the end of June in Mexico City, the marchers declared that "AIDS will not send us back into the closet."

Groups such as Gay Pride Liberation (GOHL), the Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action (FHAR), the Support Center for the Gay Community and the Cultural Gay Circle, as well as groups

in some left parties, have all begun working to defend the rights of AIDS victims. In addition to this, the Foundation to Help Persons with AIDS has been set up to provide moral and financial support to victims and to counsel people on prevention and treatment.

Health workers in the field say one of the major problems they face is how to control hysterical and panic reactions in the population regarding this contagious disease. Thus, emphasis has been placed on information campaigns. But others are concerned about the implications of this pandemic on the mores of sexual behaviour. As the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano put it, "AIDS... may be the perfect excuse for policing sex."

A drug called Rivabirina is available in Mexico, where it has been used for some years against viral infections, but the Food and Drug Administration has never authorized its sale in the United States. Dr. Ponce, who attended the Third International Conference on AIDS held in Washington in June, said that conflicting reports on Ribavirina were heard at the conference. He said that although some studies indicate an improvement in AIDS patients with use of the drug, others reported no change in the victim's condition.

Interviewed at the National Nutrition Institute, the doctor said there did not appear to be any toxic side-effects associated with Ribavirina, but he added that the drug is priced so high it is out of reach for most Mexicans. Monthly treatment with the drug costs around 350,000 pesos... that is, more than three times the monthly minimum wage. At the best, said Dr. Ponce, the drug might



Photo by Antonio Ortuño

The risk is for everyone: AIDS does strike.

agnosed in just about every state in the nation. AIDS is more commonly found in Jalisco and in the northern border-states of Baja Califor-

nia, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila and Nuevo León. Dr. Sepúlveda pointed out that the northern states border with Texas and California

which he said are two of the three states in the U.S. with the highest number of reported AIDS victims.

Seventy five percent of AIDS patients in Mexico are

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### "The virus has no sexual preference"

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people aged between 25 and 44 years, while people between 45 and 64 constitute 13% of the cases. Dr. Ponce de León reported five victims under the age of 15. These patients are cared for in the Pediatrics Institute, at the Children's Hospital or in the Social Security's facilities.

#### We Must Overcome Aids

Epidemiologists estimate that if the disease continues to spread at the current rate, by 1991 there will be between 22,000 and 30,000 AIDS victims in Mexico. This of course will represent a heavy financial burden for health authorities. Dr. Ponce believes medical care for each AIDS patient may cost around 20 million pesos (some \$15,000), while according to the WHO, treatment for an AIDS patient in the United States costs between 25,000 and 150,000 dollars.

control the virus but it cannot destroy it. Nevertheless, AIDS victims are known to come from the United States to Mexico to buy the drug.

At the symposium on AIDS held at the Medical Center, Dr. Jesús Kumate, Under-Secretary of Health, said that it's unlikely a vaccine will be developed against AIDS in the next five years, and that the virus is a very changeable retro-virus. Dr. Soberón explained that an infected person will then always carry the virus and can transmit it to others, although not all carriers will develop the disease.

The symposium ended with a call for international cooperation put forth by Dr. Jonathan Mann, Director of the UN Special Program against AIDS. His closing words were "We must overcome AIDS before it overcomes us."

J.B.