AIDS now a top killer of La. men ages 25-44

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AIDS has overtaken homicide as the leading killer of men ages 25-44 in Louisiana's two largest cities.

AIDS was the leading cause of death among men ages 25-44 in Baton Rouge in the last three years, and the disease was also the leading killer of men in that age group in New Orleans in 1992.

AIDS also became the leading killer in Lafayette, and the second leading killer in Shreveport and in Jefferson Parish, among men in that age group in 1992. It had a high ranking in the causes of death in Alexandria and Monroe.

The death figures, provided by the state Office of Public Health, are the latest signs of the steady spread of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, for which there is no known cure.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in June that in 1990 AIDS was the leading killer of men ages 25-44 in Baton Rouge and 63 other cities with populations over

Needle exchange suggested, 4A

100,000.

Despite the high number of AIDS cases in New Orleans, that city was not on the list because of its even higher number of homicides.

However, in 1992, AIDS overtook homicides to become the leading killer of men ages 25-44 in Orleans Parish, according to OPH data.

In Orleans Parish in 1992, AIDS killed 170 men in the age group studied, far more than the 102 men killed by homicide and legal intervention, such as shootings by police.

AIDS continued to be the leading killer in Baton Rouge in the 25-44 age group in 1991 and 1992, the OPH data show.

In Baton Rouge, AIDS began increasing as a cause of death in 1987, when the disease caused just eight of 111 deaths in the age group. That same year accidents killed 19, and homicide and legal intervention killed 17.

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In 1992, AIDS killed 35 people, surpassing the 27 deaths from homicide and legal interventions and 23 deaths from accidents that were part of the total of 155 deaths in Baton Rouge, OPH data show.

The AIDS-related deaths in Baton Rouge were evenly spread among black and white people. There was no information available on how the men who died contracted AIDS.

The 1992 data is preliminary, but the figures are unlikely to change significantly, OPH statistician Tom Ballinger said.

In Lafayette, AIDS killed 10 men of the same age group in 1992, more than any other cause of death.

Dr. Louise McFarland, head of OPH's epidemiology section, said the data reflect that the disease was primarily spread among male homosexuals in the 1980s.

Sometime after the next five years, AIDS will no longer be the leading cause of death among men in this age group, she said.

That is because public education has led people to avoid the risky behaviors that cause transmission of HIV — the virus that causes the disease — such as unprotected sex and sharing needles to inject drugs, she said.

"I really feel that there's been some modification in behavior," McFarland said. "I know a lot of people disagree with me, but I really feel that way."

McFarland could not point to any particular achievements in education, but said her view is based on her general experience in educating the public about AIDS since 1984.

Dr. Andrew Moss, professor of epidemiology at University of California at San Francisco, said recent studies have debunked the idea that public education has significantly reduced risky behavior by homosexuals and drug users.

Public health officials "went through a period of self-congratulation" about the success of their efforts to change behavior, he said.

"We've come to the conclusion that we've got to start again with HIV infection prevention," he said.

"Were I the Louisiana state epidemiologist, I'd think carefully about it," he said.

A recent study by UCSF researchers found that 30 percent of young homosexuals, those under age 30, in San Francisco are HIV-positive.

"Their risk behavior is very considerable still, not much better than it was 10 years ago," he said.

Dr. Peter Drotman, an AIDS specialist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said AIDS death figures have risen steadily over the last decade, but it is difficult to predict future rates.

"I don't know whether what (McFarland) is saying will come true or not," said Drotman, assistant director for public health in the CDC division of HIV/AIDS.

Education has made "virtually everybody" aware of what causes AIDS, but many people are not acting on that knowledge, he said.

"I can't say that we have any cause to relax our prevention efforts. If anything, we need to increase them," Drotman said.

Meanwhile, there is little disagreement that AIDS is spreading rapidly among heterosexuals.

McFarland said that some time in about the next five years, AIDS will become the leading killer among young women.

"We're going to see more (AIDS) in the heterosexual population, and particularly in females," she said.

Heterosexual AIDS cases accounted for 9 percent of all AIDS cases diagnosed in Louisiana in 1992, an 80 percent increase from 1991, OPH reported recently.

In addition, 60 percent of the approximately 230 heterosexual AIDS cases in the state have been diagnosed since 1991, OPH said.

In Baton Rouge in 1992, homicide and legal intervention killed nine women ages 25-44, while AIDS killed five women in that age group, OPH data show. Homicide and legal intervention were also the leading cause of death of women in New Orleans.

Sue Troxler, who monitors the AIDS epidemic for OPH, said she is concerned about the spread of the disease among heterosexuals.

"The next big wave is heterosexuals, and there are a lot of people out there who are not going to get the message," she said.

As of mid-June, 4,616 AIDS cases had been reported in Louisiana, and about 60 percent of those people had died. OPH officials believe the number of people infected by HIV may be up to 10 times higher than the number of reported AIDS cases.

Of the AIDS cases, 2,828, or 62 percent, were caused by homosexual sex, OPH believes. Another 11 percent of the total are believed to have been caused by intravenous drug use.

Sara Sims, executive director of Friends for Life-Capital Area HIV/AIDS Services, said the OPH death figures underscore a continuing need for "aggressive public education" about AIDS.

"Unfortunately, it takes this for people to wake up and believe that this is a disease that kills people, and lots of people," she said.

"We still believe that the general public has an overall level of ignorance and denial about the epidemic," Sims said.