La. estimate: 16,000 AIDS, HIV cases

By PETER SHINKLE

About 16,000 Louisianans have AIDS or the virus that causes the fatal disease, state health officials have concluded. Health officials have been struggling to assess the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV. Previously, the state Office of Public Health, using a rough formula, estimated that as many as 30,000 people had HIV.

But new data — tests of newborn babies — have enabled health officials to estimate that 14,156 people had HIV or AIDS in 1990, said Dr. Tom Farley, medical director for OPH's programs on AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Since 1990, about 1,000 to 2,000 people have contracted HIV each year, bringing the number of currently infected, living patients to about 16,000, Farley said.

"We're not trying to minimize the epidemic: 14,000 is still a big number to me," Farley said.

The new estimate indicates that the epidemic will take a heavy toll in Louisiana, in both economic and humanitarian terms, Farley said. The estimate underscores the need for efforts to prevent the spread of HIV.

"A preventive strategy would not only do a lot to save lives and save suffering, it would also do a lot to save dollars, a tremendous amount of dollars," he said.

For example, each new case of AIDS is expected to cost roughly $100,000 to treat for the rest of the patient's life.

If there are 1,500 new HIV cases each year, those cases eventually will cost $150 million in health care.

"That's not to say that what counts is the expense. Really what counts is the human suffering and the loss," Farley said.

Since the beginning of the epidemic in the early 1980s, more than 5,000 Louisianians have been reported as having AIDS, and about 60 percent of those people have died.

In recent years, health officials in Louisiana and nationwide have warned that AIDS, initially concentrated in the homosexual community, was spreading among women and heterosexuals.

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However, the new estimate, which OPH will release today on World AIDS Day, suggests that intravenous drug use accounts for an increasing share of the HIV cases.

Intravenous drug use caused about 22 percent of the 14,156 HIV or AIDS cases in 1990, according to the new estimate. In contrast, intravenous drug use was cited as the cause of just 12 percent of the 5,000 adult cases of AIDS reported since the beginning of the epidemic.

“We probably have a bigger problem with intravenous drug users than we thought,” he said.

Future prevention efforts should be directed at intravenous drug users, Farley said.

The new estimate improves knowledge of the epidemic in Louisiana, Farley said. Previously, health officials largely had to rely on reported AIDS cases, but it can take 10 years or more for HIV to result in full-blown AIDS. Therefore, current AIDS cases reveal little about the spread of HIV. The new data provide actual estimates of current HIV infection rates.

The new estimate confirms the concern about the increasing transmission of HIV among heterosexuals. About 5 percent of AIDS cases reported so far have been attributed to heterosexual sex.

The new estimate finds that 7 percent of the 14,156 HIV or AIDS cases in 1990 were due to heterosexual contact.

In addition, the new estimate said that homosexual sex caused about 62 percent of the 14,156 HIV or AIDS cases in 1990, nearly the same percentage of all AIDS cases reported to date that were caused by homosexual sex.

The new estimate was made possible by tests of the blood from every newborn baby in the state.

Under state law, blood is drawn from newborns to test for hypothyroidism and phenylketonuria, genetic disorders that can cause brain damage if they go untreated. The tests are performed in state laboratories.

In 1989, OPH began using extra blood from those tests to test for HIV, without keeping any information about the infant or mother, Farley said.

The state earlier this year began requiring health professionals to report positive tests for HIV, but the data are so far “too biased” to be of value, he said.