

Progress, Not Victory, Defines Fight Against HIV/AIDS

By Jonathan Van Dyke

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Progress in some aspects, a little regression in others —that’s how local doctors and experts characterized the fight against HIV and AIDS nationally and in Long Beach.

According to the Long Beach Health Department, there are about 6,000 people living with HIV in the city — homosexual men account for about three-fourths of new infections.

Since the 1980s, the battle against the disease has seen a great deal of progress, experts said, especially in treatment methods and life expectancy. Medications made significant progress in early 1990s and again in the latter part of the decade at far as ART (antiretroviral therapy) treatment.

“That was the first time we could really see the virus controlled in person,” said Dr. Marcia Alcouloumre, medical director of St. Mary Medical Center’s CARE (Comprehensive AIDS Resource and Education) program. “As new classes evolved, we had much more effective ways of treating people.”

HIV is contracted by the exchange of bodily fluids (blood, semen, etc), often through sex. The disease attacks a person’s immune system, which can become damaged to the point that the disease leads to AIDS.

Alcouloumre said recent progress has involved when patients are treated and not necessarily as much how they are treated.

“The most recent things coming out — we’re finding it helps to treat people earlier and not to allow their immune systems to get damaged,” she said. “By treating people earlier, it helps prevent other diseases that are not AIDS-related, but rather liver or heart disease that become worse with HIV.”

Other progress involves working to lower the amount of the disease in relation to reducing the chances of transmission, she added.

“The virus is always there; (but) it may stop from growing and that allows the immune system to recover,” she said. “I think there is definitely progress with people living with this longer — being able to work and have relationships and living their lives.”

Because of the progress made and with just a little bit of the social stigma and fear removed, doctors and experts said there has been a bit of a fallback culturally when it comes to new cases.

“A lot of these kids are younger, so they don’t have a recollection of people and their friends dying, so it’s further from their thoughts,” said Dr. Jag Batra, infectious disease physician at the Bickerstaff HIV Pediatric Family Center of Miller Children’s Hospital.

Batra confirmed that his center has seen an uptick in HIV cases in younger people, specifically males having sex with males aged between 16 and 21.

“Now people hear about the treatments and there’s less fear of the disease, which can lead people to unsafe practices,” Alcouloumre said.

CARE treats about 1,200 patients annually, she said, and that number has stayed steady over the years or has increased by a little. In many ways, better treatment has shown itself as a double-edged sword for a newly naïve generation.

“There still is transmission, but quality of life is better than 20 years ago, and I think that is very true for Long Beach,” Alcouloumre said. “Hopefully as we move to earlier treatment, maybe we will start seeing a drop again.”

At Bickerstaff, officials said they have worked tirelessly over the years to prevent transmission of HIV from mother to infant — the number has dropped from about 25% to 1-2%. Besides that, patients have a better fighting chance than ever, Medical Director Dr. Audra Deveikis said.

“In the last 10 years, the patients who die are usually patients who have not been able to be compliant with their treatment,” she said. “Many of our patients are very healthy and perform activities just like the rest of the general population.”

Testing is on the rise at The Center Long Beach, said Porter Gilberg, operations manager.

“I would say for us, we’ve been offering free rapid HIV testing for a couple years now, and I believe the awareness is growing that it’s important to get tested,” she said. “We are testing more people every single day.”

Gilberg said the amount of people tested in recent months has been almost double that of the same time period last year.

“I hope that means awareness is improving,” she said. “The economy also wiped out a lot of people’s health insurance, so they may just be taking advantage of a low-to-no-cost resource, but that’s why we’re here.”