

Local AIDS cases start to level off

By TOM LONG
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SANTA CRUZ — The war against AIDS is far from over, but the number of casualties may be slowing.

Against expectations, the number of people diagnosed with AIDS in this county actually dropped in 1989. And the reason may be that people infected with the HIV virus that causes AIDS are seeking medical help earlier.

"What we're looking at is a lot of people getting sick on and off over a longer period of time but never really getting full-blown AIDS," said Rita Scardaci, assistant chief of public health for the county.

Twenty-three cases of AIDS were diagnosed in Santa Cruz County during 1989, as opposed to 32 cases that were diagnosed during 1988. But the percentage of people who are testing positive for HIV infection here has not decreased dramatically in the past three years.

The dip in the number of diagnosed AIDS patients would seem to contradict earlier projections of ever-increasing cases. But the whole business of projecting numbers connected to AIDS and HIV-infection has turned chaotic in the past two years with the advent of new drugs and the success of education programs.

The careful monitoring of patients who test positive for the HIV virus as well as the development of drugs that fight the infection have made those initial projections obsolete, according to Scardaci.

In fact, most doctors no longer see AIDS as a condition unto itself

AIDS facts

- Number of people who have been diagnosed with AIDS in Santa Cruz County — 104.

- Number of those people who have died — 61.

- Number of people tested by the county for HIV infection in 1985 — 210.

- Number of people tested by the county for HIV infection in 1989 — 1,779.

- Number of AIDS cases per 100,000 people in Santa Cruz County — 47.

- Number of AIDS cases per 100,000 people in San Francisco — 1,065.

- Percentage of positive HIV tests locally for gay men tested in 1985 — 33.

- Percentage of positive HIV tests locally for gay men tested in 1989 — 6.4.

- Number of males diagnosed with AIDS in Santa Cruz County — 101.

- Number of females diagnosed with AIDS in Santa Cruz County — 3.

- Number of AIDS diagnoses locally linked to heterosexual activity — 3.

- Number of AIDS diagnoses locally linked to homosexual activity — 82.

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but as a deadly set of symptoms that can occur following HIV infection.

"I think we see HIV infection and HIV disease as more of a spectrum and AIDS is the end of the spectrum," said Dr. Todd Mitchell, a Santa Cruz family practitioner who treats AIDS patients.

"The spectrum of diseases that forms the definition of AIDS are for the most part things we don't see until people are far along the continuum," Mitchell said.

Possibly the key factor in the drop in AIDS cases has been the successful education drive to reach those in high-risk groups — homosexual men, intravenous drug users, bisexual men, heterosexuals with many lovers — and convince them to be tested for the virus, said Scardaci. Many of those who have tested positive have subsequently begun treatment to contain the virus before it causes serious problems.

"It's more a chronic disease state," said Scardaci. "The earlier people are tested and started on medications you're going to have a decrease in AIDS cases."

At the same time, the state Office of AIDS is revising its estimate of how many Californians have been infected with the HIV virus.

"We are seeing fewer cases than we had originally projected," said Office of AIDS analyst Mike Hughes in Sacramento. "We've reduced our estimates of the total number of people infected. At one point we thought it might be 200 to 300,000 people. Now our best estimate is 130,000."

According to Scardaci, the estimate of HIV-infected people in Santa Cruz County has dropped from a high estimate of more than 2,300 people to a high estimate of "about 2,000."

But while estimates of the number of those infected and those who will actually develop AIDS may have dropped, the numbers are still staggering. As of Jan. 31, 24,427 cases of AIDS had been diagnosed statewide; 15,465 of those diagnosed had died.

Countywide, 104 cases of AIDS have been diagnosed; 61 of those cases have ended in death.

The longer life span for HIV patients will inevitably change the way that AIDS programs are funded, said Scardaci. Whereas much of the money for medical services to HIV patients used to be spent on the end-stage of the disease, the bulk of future medical costs is likely to be spent on maintenance of health and preventive drugs.

Where doctors once thought those with HIV infection were destined to have AIDS within five to seven years, that projection has now been lengthened to 10 years, according to Mitchell.

"Even though the number of AIDS cases may appear to be less, there's a basic increase in the number of individuals who will need treatment and services," said Scardaci. But Scardaci said that the high cost of hospitalizing seriously ill AIDS patients should offset some of the cost of maintaining HIV patients.

And while no AIDS story can yet be said to have a happy ending, Mitchell said that those with HIV infection now have reason for hope.

"With the drugs that we have available now and with the drugs that will be coming down the pike, the outlook is getting better and better," Mitchell said. "I wouldn't tell somebody that we now have a cure — nobody's claiming that — but we can keep people alive much longer with a much better quality of life."