

# SENSE OF URGENCY



Dr. Wafaa El-Sadr of Harlem (r) consults with HIV patient Mvunyelwa Labane.

## A worldwide devastation

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DURBAN, South Africa — Imagine that two of every 10 people packed into your subway car had HIV, or three of the 10 pregnant women sitting in your doctor's waiting room had the virus.

That is what the AIDS epidemic looks like in this richest of southern African nations.

In much of the world, AIDS is a scourge of biblical proportions.

Some 24.5 million people with the disease — 64% of the world's cases — are in Africa. Because of its devastation, seven countries in the region now have life expectancies of less than 40 years.

“There are so many people sick, so many people dying like ants. Maybe God has abandoned us,” says Wellington Ngqebane, chairman of St. Patrick's Hospital in the impoverished town of Bizana.

AIDS is destroying economies by wiping out the young people who dominate the labor force. As it kills farmers, the hungry starve. As teachers cancel their lesson plans to care for sick family members, students stop learning.

Most heartbreaking, AIDS has left close to 10% of sub-Saharan children with one or no parents.

No one can say for certain why the suffering here is so staggering. But scientists believe HIV jumped from animals to humans in the Belgian Congo some 80 years ago, decades before it would show its face in the rest of the world.

“Africa has the oldest experience with what is essentially a new disease,” says Paul De Lay, director of evaluation at UNAIDS.

But parts of the world that were once spared by the virus are now showing signs of infection. The most startling increases are in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where infections have leaped by 25% since 2003.

A youth culture of injection drug use started the spread in countries such as Ukraine, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Now, as drug-abusing sex workers turn tricks with people who don't use drugs, the virus is casting its net even further, De Lay says.

There are success stories.

In Kenya, Zimbabwe, Cambodia and Thailand, safe-sex campaigns have helped reverse the spread of HIV.

The protease inhibitor drugs that resurrected HIV-positive Americans from their deathbeds in the mid-1990s are finally reaching people in developing nations. Twenty-one of these countries are now getting life-sustaining AIDS drugs to half of patients who need them.

The medicines are making a difference: 93% of those who take them are still alive a year later, according to the World Health Organization. But in many of the poorest countries, a mere fraction of patients can get the magic pills.

Today, the AIDS epidemic is stabilizing in sub-Saharan Africa. But although that means it's not getting any bigger, the world will spend the next 50 to 100 years recovering from it, De Lay says.

“We're now in a generation of people who have not lived in a world without AIDS,” he says. “There's a danger of complacency that we learn to live with it and we learn to die from it.”

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5-month-old son from AIDS only when she's asked if she has other children.

“You can see the impact of the epidemic on these families, but it's still something no one talks about,” El-Sadr says.

To fathom the sheer scale of suffering can be too much to bear. El-Sadr takes comfort in the commitment of her African colleagues, in whose devotion she sees her own.

In Durban, tears roll down Bathabile Zungu's cheeks as she returns for the first time to the room where her favorite patient Thembelihe, whose name meant “good hope,” died eight months before.

“I tried staying away from this house, because I knew he wouldn't be here,” the heavy-set AIDS counselor says, weeping. “I believe his spirit is around. I feel connected to him when I come back.

“A neighbor's child is my child,” Zungu says. “They need to get well for us to be a community.”

Looking on, El-Sadr cries silently.

Of the spirits in this modest living room, she recognizes the kindred one.

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Woman ravaged by AIDS lies in bed at hospital clinic near Bizana, South Africa.