

## HEALTH

## Kenyan cousins may be link to cure

By Karin Davies  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MAJENGO, Kenya — The two cousins have a lot in common. Divorced and desperately poor, both work as prostitutes out of their tiny, tin-roofed huts in a no-hope slum to feed their children.

They share intimacies, child-care duties, and meals and money when one needs a hand the other can give.

Hawa Chelangat, 34, and Hadija Chemutai, 31, also share what to them is a blessing in their otherwise cursed lives — they are apparently immune to the deadly AIDS virus.

"Because my blood has remained clean, I just feel it is God who has been good to me," said Chelangat, a devout Muslim. "It's luck, and God has been so good."

As a prostitute for 14 years on a continent where more than half the world's 23 million HIV-infected people live, she is, indeed, lucky to be free of the AIDS virus. Since AIDS appeared in Kenya in the early 1980s, the sexually transmitted disease has infected 95 percent of the prostitutes who work in the Majengo slum on the outskirts of Nairobi.

The cousins are among just 60 women out of 1,864 who have visited the Majengo clinic for prostitutes since 1985 and remained HIV-negative for three or more years.

"We think they are immune to HIV," said Dr. Frank Plummer, a University of Manitoba physician who is principal researcher at the clinic. "We are calling it resistant — we are not calling it immune — but we have a lot of evidence that their immune systems are able to recognize and kill HIV."

If the source of the women's protection can be identified, it could yield new clues for creating a vaccine against AIDS, Plummer and researchers not involved with the clinic said.

That Chelangat and Chemutai are cousins is important. Researchers have strong evidence HIV-resistance clusters in families.

"We think there's something fundamentally different about their immune systems that is mediated by genetics, and we're trying hard to track it down," Plummer said.

It isn't just safe sex that has kept the prostitutes HIV-free, he insisted.

They, too, sometimes contract other sexually transmitted diseases, such as gonorrhea or syphilis, a sign that they don't always use condoms. Women in the study for a decade, including the cousins, would have experienced about 500 unprotected exposures to the AIDS virus, Plummer said.

To feed their families, the cousins entertain about five men a day each for the going rate of 20 Kenyan shillings, about 30 cents. That is the price of a loaf of bread, not enough to buy a cold Coke.

The cheap price is what makes the prostitutes of Majengo so popular. Men come by for a few minutes on the way to work or at lunchtime. Women like



Chelangat and Chemutai are just another commodity in the rundown, square-mile market town within sight of the towers of downtown Nairobi.

Amid the poverty, Chelangat and Chemutai are working mothers struggling to provide for their families. They are self-employed — there are no brothels, no pimps in Majengo. They work during the day while their children are at school.

Both women turned to prostitution — Chelangat in 1983 and Chemutai in 1987 — because divorces left them with no incomes and children to support.

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Diabetes  
incidence  
rising

By Tara Meyer  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — A fatter, less active and older America has helped push diabetes to its highest levels yet in the United States.

As of 1997, about 10 million people have been diagnosed with diabetes, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday. Nearly 6 million more people have the disease and don't know it. The figures represent a sixfold increase from 1.6 million in 1958.

"We are becoming a more overweight population, we are less active and we are also getting somewhat older," said Dr. Frank Vinicor, director of the CDC's diabetes division. "If you put all of those factors together, we are seeing a chronic disease epidemic occurring."

It isn't just a U.S. problem. The CDC and the World Health Organization estimate that 125 million people worldwide have diabetes, a number expected to double by the year 2025.

"Diabetes is a common disease, a serious disease and it's a very costly disease," said Linda Geiss, surveillance chief of the CDC's diabetes division.

Diabetes — a condition in which blood sugar levels rise out of control, causing nerve damage — is the fourth leading cause of death by disease in the United States. It also is a leading cause of kidney failure, non-traumatic amputations, heart disease, stroke and blindness.

The CDC estimates 15.7 million people in the United States currently have diabetes. In its early stages, the symptoms are not very apparent. Diabetes is caused by a deficiency of insulin, a hormone that controls blood sugar and is secreted by the pancreas.

Between 1980 and 1994, diabetes rose 33 percent among blacks, from 40.1 diagnosed cases for every 1,000 people to 53.5 cases per 1,000. Among whites during the same years, the rate rose 11 percent, from 23.8 cases per 1,000 to 26.4.



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