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Serving the Carolinas' Gay & Lesbian Communities Since 1979

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AIDS Risk, Death Fall for People with HIV

By Daniel Q. Haney
Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Seven years into the modern era of AIDS treatment, the outlook for people with HIV infections continues to improve.

Encouraging new European data released Friday show that the risk of developing full-blown AIDS or dying of the disease is still falling.

In 1996, treatments became widely available that abruptly changed the prospects for people with HIV. These people once faced almost certain death, but the combinations of drugs have made HIV a treatable and largely survivable infection.

Still, many have wondered how long these benefits would last. Currently, 16 AIDS drugs are on the market, and many more are in development. Yet some patients have resistant forms of the virus that flourish despite shifting combinations of pills. Others have worrisome side effects, such as rising cholesterol levels.

However, figures presented Feb. 14 at the 10th Conference on Retroviruses show that despite all the drawbacks, the drugs continue to work well, and their benefits have not been exhausted.

Dr. Amanda Mocroft of Royal Free and University College Medical School in London outlined the outcomes of 9,803 people diagnosed with HIV in Europe between 1994 and 2002. Between 1994 and 1998, their risk of AIDS or death fell by 80 percent.

Since then, improvements have continued. Between September 1998 and 2002, the risk of AIDS or death has fallen 8 percent each six months. "Even though therapy is not perfect, it's working," Mocroft said.

The continuing decline in death and AIDS is a surprise, she said. "An awful lot of people expected the curve to bottom out or even rise again, but it's still going down," she said, "which is very encouraging."

The outlook is worst when peo-



Former President Bill Clinton delivers the keynote address during the 10th annual Retrovirus Conference in Boston, Monday, Feb. 10, 2003, in Boston. Over 3,900 researchers and clinicians from around the world met in Boston from Feb. 10 through 14 for the AIDS conference.

AP Photo/Angela Rowlings

ple have high levels of virus and few of the blood cells that HIV attacks. Mocroft's team found that survival has significantly improved in recent years among people who start treatment with low blood counts but not among those with higher levels.

"It's quite remarkable. You have to wonder what the end of the story will be," said Dr. Kevin DeCock, head of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's program in Kenya.

In the United States, the CDC has followed 1,769 Americans

diagnosed with HIV since 1994, and "we have data that corroborates what the Europeans are saying," said Dr. Scott Holmberg, a senior epidemiologist.

The first goal of treatment is to drive down the virus so it falls below the ability of detection on standard tests, which can find 25 copies of HIV in a milliliter of blood. In the mid-1990s, many worried that virus levels would begin to rise again as resistant forms of HIV evolved, but Holmberg said the opposite has

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GMHC Blasts VaxGen

Nation's Oldest AIDS Service Organization Criticizes VaxGen for Obfuscation of Trial Results of its AIDS Vaccine

Press Release

NEW YORK — Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) has criticized VaxGen, the maker of the AIDS vaccine candidate, AIDSVAX, for obfuscation of its trial results. Despite showing no effect overall in protecting against infection with HIV, the company highlighted a subset of results which seemed to show efficacy in African-Americans and Asians.

GMHC looks forward to the day when HIV will be a preventable disease and is a strong supporter of AIDS vaccine research, including VaxGen's research efforts. However, the conduct of vaccine research must be held to the highest standards of ethics and accuracy, as millions of lives depend on the results of these scientific studies.

"Subset analyses are problematic in the best of cases. With small numbers of African-Americans and Asians in the trial and wide confidence intervals associated with the results, making any statements about efficacy in this subpopulation is grossly premature," said Gregg Gonsalves, Director of Treatment and Prevention Advocacy at GMHC. VaxGen's assertions of its vaccine's efficacy among blacks are based on 13 infections in this population in a trial of more than 5000 participants. The assertions about efficacy among Asians are based on only 4 HIV infections in the study.

GMHC is particularly worried that the "spin" of these results will sow confusion in communities particularly at risk in the United States, specifically African-Americans, and is asking the company to clarify its statements on the subset analysis of African-Americans and Asians, particularly its claims of efficacy for this population, and is calling on the media to look more closely at the data before drawing any conclusions.

GMHC also has concerns that VaxGen's interpretation of its results will also provide false hopes in Africa and Asia, where the rates of HIV infection are highest in the world, and which will be the major market for AIDS vaccines.

The vaccine in this study did not use strains of HIV prevalent in Africa and Asia.