

Cimons, M. & Maugh, T.H. II. New strategies fuel optimism in AIDS fight. (1995, February 20). Los Angeles Times, pp. A1, A24, A26, A27.

OVERVIEW

Despite recent reports indicating that AIDS is more dangerous and aggressive than most had believed, many researchers are more optimistic about the chances of fighting the disease than at any time since the discovery of AZT, the main drug of current AIDS treatment programs. The optimism is coming in part from the discovery that the virus is surprisingly vulnerable to new combinations of antiviral agents and to a new class of drugs called protease inhibitors.

Clinicians are abandoning the standard model of HIV as a simple infection that can be treated with a single drug in the same way that a bacterial infection is cleared up with an antibiotic. Instead, they are looking to the field of cancer therapy, where a single tumor is aggressively attacked with a "cocktail" of different drugs that each exploit a unique vulnerability of the cancer cells. This shotgun approach could not be used with AIDS before because clinicians only had bullets—AZT and two other drugs. However, new discoveries have suddenly stocked their armory. "Now we have more tools, better drugs, better assay development—the field has matured a lot," affirms Dr. David Ho, director of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center in the New York City.

Critics caution that the promising studies have not been in progress long enough to determine if the new drugs actually prolong life. They also warn that most of the new drugs are very expensive. Others add that researchers may be overoptimistic simply because there was so little good news in the past.

In 1994, AIDS became the leading killer of young adults in the U.S., accounting for one in every five deaths among those aged 25 to 44, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There were 80,691 new cases of AIDS in 1994, but the number of new cases is leveling off, growing by only about 3% per year. "The epidemic is slowing, and we can take comfort in that—but small comfort," said Dr. John Ward of CDC.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How optimistic are you regarding our ability to control the AIDS epidemic?
2. Do you think our society has done enough research on AIDS? Would you favor increased government spending for this research?
3. Do you think our consideration of AIDS should be linked to matters of sexual lifestyle?

IMPLICATIONS

1. It is important for everyone to understand the suffering of AIDS patients, their families, and their friends.
2. We must do our best to treat this disease, serve its victims, and prevent its spread.

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