



November 27th, 2003

### **RECORD RISE IN HIV CASES IN THE NORTH WEST**

As a Health Protection Agency (HPA) report reveals that nearly 50,000 people are now living with HIV in the UK, Professor Dr. John Ashton, North West Regional Director of Public Health, has called on the "clubbing generation" to learn the lesson that unprotected sex with a new partner can be extremely risky.

Last year, for the first time heterosexuals accounted for the majority of new cases of HIV recorded in the North West. A high proportion of these were linked to travel abroad and arrivals from countries outside the UK (mostly from countries in sub-Saharan Africa, which have a high prevalence of HIV).

Professor Ashton said: "Sex is one of the great joys in life and no one wants to put a damper on people having fun, but to have unprotected sex with someone you have only just met, perhaps in a nightclub or on a foreign holiday, is a form of Russian roulette. HIV and AIDS were not phenomena of the 1980s. The figures are continuing to rise and people really need to protect themselves."

Professor Ashton's warning is echoed by Professor Qutub Syed, the HPA's North West Regional Director, who points out that all sexually transmitted infections are on the increase and that the trend will only be reversed through "greater awareness and understanding of the risks and by people taking responsibility for their actions."

"We saw a reduction in many sexually transmitted diseases for a period in the 1980s as a result of the AIDS scare. Now we are seeing evidence that young people, often subjected to peer pressure, are ignoring advice and putting themselves and others at risk," Professor Syed said.

"It's a major problem and one that we will need to address through partnership with schools, education authorities and the news media. We really need to increase awareness and understanding of what is a serious social issue that is blighting the lives of thousands of people and their families."

The Health Protection Agency report, published to mark World AIDS Day, reveals that there has been an increase of nearly 20% in the number of people living with HIV in the UK, up from 41,700 in 2001 to 49,500 in 2002.

In the same period, the North West Region saw the biggest increase in the number of people having treatment for the AIDS virus since regional monitoring began eight years ago.

During 2002, 2,496 people with HIV or AIDS received treatment and care in the region, compared to the previous year's figure of 1,977.

Health professionals say the increase is partly due to improvements in treatments for HIV, resulting in people living longer. However, 617 new HIV and AIDS cases were reported in the North West during 2002 - the highest number of new cases in a single year since regional monitoring of HIV and AIDS was introduced.

Whilst emphasising the risks associated with unprotected sex with new partners, Professor Ashton and Professor Syed both stress that no stigma should be attached to HIV and AIDS and that anyone who suspects that he or she may have contracted the HIV virus or any other sexually transmitted infection (STI) should have no hesitation in seeking help.

These sentiments are shared by Dr. Kevin Fenton, an HIV public health consultant with the Health Protection Agency.

“With stigma and discrimination being the theme for this year’s World AIDS Day, it is important to highlight that these are still major obstacles for people living with HIV,” Dr. Fenton said.

“Tackling these issues is important so that more people may come forward for testing. The earlier people are diagnosed with HIV, the greater chance they will have of living a longer and healthier life. Awareness of their HIV status also enables people to make informed choices about their sexual behaviour and practising safer sex”

#### **NOTE TO NEWS EDITORS:**

**The table compares the North West’s HIV figures for 2002 with the previous year’s.**

<b>County</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>% Increase</b>
Cumbria	63	63	0.0
Lancashire	322	398	23.6
Merseyside	220	293	33
Cheshire	149	174	17
Greater Manchester	1103	1371	24.3
Out of Region	94	98	
Not Known	26	32	
<b>Total</b>	<b>1977</b>	<b>2496</b>	<b>26.25</b>

1. ‘Renewing the Focus’ is a report published by the Health Protection Agency for World AIDS Day. To see a full copy of the report please go to: [http://hpa-dev/infections/topics\\_az/hiv\\_and\\_sti/wad.htm](http://hpa-dev/infections/topics_az/hiv_and_sti/wad.htm). The report is a collaboration between the Health Protection Agency, the Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health, the National Public Health Service for Wales, CDSC Northern Ireland, the Unlinked Anonymous Surveys Steering Group, and the Institute of Child Health (London).

2. The North West figures in this press release were provided by The Centre for Public Health at Liverpool John Moores University. A breakdown of the North West figures is available on the Regional Public Health Observatory website: [www.nwpho.org.uk/hiv2002](http://www.nwpho.org.uk/hiv2002)
3. Renewing the Focus brings together the following data:
  - HIV quarterly surveillance tables (until June 2003)
  - Survey of Prevalent Diagnosed HIV infection (SOPHID) data for 2002
  - Unlinked Anonymous Prevalence Monitoring Programme
  - Data for sexually transmitted infections in 2002 from GUM clinics
4. World AIDS Day is on 1<sup>st</sup> December and the theme this year is stigma and discrimination.
5. Data to the end of September 2003, shows that there were 5,711 people newly diagnosed with HIV in the UK in 2002. Of these, 3,305 were heterosexually acquired and 1,691 were amongst gay and bisexual men. When all reports are received this figure is expected to rise to 6,400.
6. Data from the Survey of Prevalent HIV Infections Diagnosed (SOPHID) shows that 30,281 HIV positive individuals were seen for care in England, Wales and Northern Ireland during 2002.
7. Of the 49,500 people living with HIV in the UK, a third are still unaware of their diagnosis.
8. Unlinked anonymous testing of gay and bisexual men attending GUM clinics indicates that three in a hundred contracted HIV infection during 2002.
9. There were 1,850 cases of HIV diagnosed during 2002 that were likely to have been acquired in the UK. Approximately 1,500 (80%) of these were amongst gay or bisexual men.
10. During 2002, women aged 16-24 years accounted for 72% of all chlamydia diagnoses, 66% of gonorrhoea, 62% of syphilis and 61% of genital warts out of all female diagnoses.

Press release issued by Hugh Lamont on 07764-906508 or 08700-555500, asking for NWR130.