

Introduction

FERNANDO R. K. ZACARÍAS,¹ GUEST EDITOR



This special issue of the *Bulletin of PAHO* reflects the interest and concern of the community of workers and scientists in the health field in the face of the problem caused by acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in the Region of the Americas. It constitutes what could be considered an epidemiologic mosaic of the similarities and differences of AIDS and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection in various countries and subregions of the Hemisphere. The North American experience, in which transmission among homosexuals and by contaminated needles and syringes predominates, contrasts with the rapid changes observed in the distribution of cases in the English-speaking Caribbean and Haiti, where an increasing number of women are affected by AIDS, and with the persistence of blood transmission in countries of Latin America.

The first part of this issue provides a descriptive and analytic sample of the epidemiology of AIDS that—ranging from the northern to the southern end of the Hemisphere—comprises Canada, the United States of America, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil, as well as Cuba and the English-speaking Caribbean. Interestingly, some of the articles not only document what has happened with the disease, but venture projections, derived

from various premises and forecasting techniques, about the future of the epidemic. Withal, the consensus is that the problem will get considerably worse in the near future.

The changing nature of the epidemiology of HIV infection and the importance of factors associated with these changes are pointed out by Narain et al. in their article on the situation in the Caribbean and by Díaz Lestrem et al. in theirs about the growing risk of the disease among intravenous drug users in Argentina. The latter article demonstrates how the modes and mechanisms of transmission of the hepatitis and AIDS viruses point up a common social problem. The article by Bartholomew and Cleghorn serves as a reminder that we are barely beginning to understand and deal with the spread of HIV and other human retroviruses. The importance of defining the clinical and immunologic parameters of the infection is signaled in the article by Echeverría de Pérez et al., and the urgent need to develop sensitive and appropriate technologies for HIV testing is the underlying message of the article by Ivo-dos-Santos and Galvão-Castro. Pape and Johnson, who explain perinatal transmission of HIV, provide a glimpse of the threat posed to newborns and infants if action is not taken to contain sexual transmission among adults. Analyzing the experience gained in four countries of the Americas, Bond shows that public education about AIDS has not been sufficient, despite the fact that it represents

¹Regional Adviser, PAHO/WHO Global Program on AIDS in the Americas, Pan American Health Organization, Washington, D.C., USA.

an essential first step in preventing the disease. AIDS transcends the field of biomedicine and poses thorny ethical and legal dilemmas that society must face, as Scholle Connor points out in her essay. Sepúlveda Amor et al. present an account of the efforts undertaken in Mexico to detect and attack the specific problem of HIV in blood banks. In the last article in this section, Clayton and Meltzer delineate the structure of the scientific-technical center on AIDS created by the Government of Canada to support health services in the provinces—an example of what can and should be done in other countries.

In the second part, the ideas expressed by the eminent dean of epidemiology, Alexander Langmuir, serve as a basis for the round table in which the future of the AIDS epidemic is debated from various national and international perspectives. While at present, when we are scarcely beginning to understand the natural history of retroviral infection, it is obviously impossible to make reliable projections about the consequences that AIDS will have for individuals, groups, and large populations, it is also obvious that we need to reflect, discuss, and prepare ourselves to deal with any foreseeable possibility.

The third part of this publication consists of reports and abstracts from numerous sources that complement the information provided in the articles and that deal with various aspects, positions, and activities in the fight against AIDS. Included among the subjects are the regional and global responses to the problem; the results of the First Pan American Teleconference on AIDS, which provided up-to-date scientific information and afforded an opportunity for more than 45,000 health workers in the Americas to participate; guidelines and aspects to be considered in prevention activities; reports of research under way; and, finally,

evidence that it is necessary and possible to bring together worldwide political will to combat the epidemic, as has been seen in the success of the World Summit of Ministers of Health, held in London in January 1988, which strengthened the foundation from which countries can progress from concept to action and from promise to reality.

Among the articles some discrepancies and duplication may be apparent. These are due, in part, to the promptness with which the authors responded to our urgent appeal to provide information on the AIDS situation in the countries of the Americas. To a greater degree, they may reflect the difficulty of assimilating immediately and efficiently the vertiginous explosion of new knowledge; the history of AIDS is being written as the epidemic evolves. Similarly, and for the same reasons, the contents do not represent a perfect balance of subjects nor an exactly proportional representation of countries and subregions. There is not, for example, any article dedicated exclusively to an analysis of the economic impact of AIDS on communities and health services (which is currently being carried out in Brazil) nor a description of the changing epidemiology of the infection in the Central American isthmus. Nor are there included examples of the important clinical and virologic studies under way in the Southern Cone, nor of the community-based prevention approaches aimed at individuals with high-risk behavior in the Spanish- and French-speaking Caribbean. The time limits inherent to publishing dictate that these and other studies yet to be described and written will have to await dissemination.

Notwithstanding, this issue serves as a dual testimony: on the one hand, it shows the readiness of our colleagues throughout the Region—from Ottawa and Baltimore to Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, and Havana—to make known

their national experiences; on the other, it is a document which, covering subjects as diverse as molecular biology and the ethical and legal aspects of AIDS, clearly reflects both the multidisciplinary importance of the subject and the coalescing role of epidemiology and public health.

Finally, this volume, which seemed to

materialize in no time, would not have been possible without the expert involvement of the excellent groups of editors that work in the Pan American Health Organization: thanks to them, what had been merely an idea became, in six months, a tangible and important publication.