

# Youth: A force for change

**W**orld AIDS Day, December 1, 1998, is an important international event. It joins nations and communities in one spirit to strengthen HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness programs, and to improve care, support, and treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS.

In a report released November 24, UNAIDS (the world program on AIDS) and the World Health Organization revealed that HIV infections increased by 10% in 1998, bringing the total number of people living with HIV around the globe to 33.4 million.

Although the trend to increasing infections in the general population is disturbing, this year's World AIDS Day focuses on the particular problem of HIV among youth. Youth represent a third of the people living with HIV today, and 7000 more youth worldwide are infected each day.

The problem of HIV among youth is equally serious in Canada as it is worldwide. According to Health Canada's Laboratory Centre for Disease Control, over half of new infections are occurring in youth aged 24 or less.

These statistics prompted the Canadian AIDS Society to make youth the focus of the 1998/1999 AIDS

awareness campaign. The year-long campaign is launched every year with AIDS Awareness Week, which falls immediately before World AIDS Day, November 23-30, and continues until the spring of 1999.

"Many people suffer from the misconception that

**"many people have the misconception that AIDS only affects certain populations"**

AIDS only affects certain populations," said Terrence Stewart, Chair of the Canadian AIDS Society. "The AIDS awareness campaign tries to get the message out that we're all affected."

As many as 5000 Canadians – primarily women, youth, Aboriginals, people who use needles to inject drugs (including steroids), and young gay men – may be contracting HIV each year, without realizing they're at risk.

Furthermore, the Laboratory Centre for Disease Control estimates that between 30-40% of people cur-

rently living with HIV don't know they're infected.

As for youth, "Part of being young is believing you're immortal," says Stewart. "Young gay men today in particular haven't grown up watching their friends die the way gay men did in the 1980s."

The main factor that puts youth at risk for HIV is their age. It is in adolescence that experimentation with drugs, alcohol and sexual activity often begins. While sharing needles to inject drugs (including steroids) provides a direct route for HIV transmission, alcohol and other drugs can compromise a person's judgement, reducing the chances that they will make appropriate decisions to avoid infection.

Studies have shown that 50 percent of Canadian 17 year-olds have had sexual intercourse.


Of these, 57 percent of 17 year-old boys and 45 percent of 17 year-old girls used a condom the last time they had sex. The presence of sexually transmitted diseases has also been shown to increase the risk of HIV infection if a person is exposed to the virus.

Women between the ages of 15 and 19 report the highest STD rates, and are therefore a high risk age group.

In choosing the theme for World AIDS Day 1998, "Young people: A force for change", UNAIDS said "Youth are still at the stage of experimentation and can learn more easily than adults to make their behaviour safe or to adopt safe practices from the start. But the role of young people does not stop there. They can help take the sting and shame out of AIDS where it is still stigmatized; they can bring kindness and practical help to those already infected with HIV or living in a household touched by AIDS. If they get support from the adults in their lives and from society at large, young people can change the course of the epidemic."

This message touches on two key issues in HIV/AIDS today, the need to provide youth with accurate, meaningful information about HIV/AIDS, and the need to support youth in their contribution to the fight against this incurable disease. The Canadian AIDS Society's youth campaign will attempt to do both. Watch for it next spring!


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E-mail: [thirdparty@gov.pe.ca](mailto:thirdparty@gov.pe.ca)

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