

Alarming new data shows TB-HIV co-infection a bigger threat

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Disease Experts Raise Alarm Amid Concerns Global Health Funding Will Be Shortchanged

WASHINGTON—The World Health Organization released staggering new data about the threat of tuberculosis and the toll it takes on people with HIV/AIDS today, in recognition of World TB Day.

The TB-HIV co-infection crisis is twice as big as previously thought, the new WHO figures show. In 2007, there were at least 1.37 million cases of HIV-positive TB—or nearly 15 percent of the total incident cases. That's double the previous WHO estimates.

"A global health catastrophe is unfolding," said Gerald Friedland, a professor of Medicine, Epidemiology and Public Health at Yale University School of Medicine and a leading expert on the emerging threat.

In addition, the WHO data shows that drug-resistant TB is on the rise. There were more than 500,000 cases of MDR-TB in 2007, the WHO reported. And by the end of 2008, at least 55 countries and territories had identified at least one case of extensively drug-resistant TB.

In light of the new WHO figures and increasing concern about the threat of drug-resistant TB, leading physicians and scientists are urging the Obama administration to triple the U.S. donation to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and to dramatically ramp up the U.S.'s own vastly-underfunded global TB programs.

Right now, nearly 60 countries are seeking new Global Fund grants for anti-TB programs. But the Fund, facing a \$5 billion donation shortfall, may not be able to finance any of these desperately needed efforts.

Five world-renown experts on TB and HIV are available to discuss the new WHO data set to be released on March 24th, World TB Day. They can address the scope of the TB-HIV co-infection crisis and talk about how U.S. policy makers should respond.

Tuberculosis is sometimes a forgotten and neglected disease. But an estimated one-third of the world's population is infected with the bacterium that causes TB, and the disease kills nearly 1.7 million people each year.

Now, virulent new drug-resistant strains of TB are on the rise across the globe. HIV-positive patients are highly vulnerable to TB, because of their weakened immune systems, and tuberculosis is now the No. 1 killer of people with HIV.

These twin epidemics present a stark new global health threat and raise the prospect of a global pandemic of extensively-drug-resistant TB, which is extremely difficult to treat.

The new WHO figures come amid deep concern among global health advocates that the Obama administration will flatline vital HIV/AIDS and TB programs, as the global recession deepens. The president is expected to release his detailed request for global health and other programs in the coming weeks. Advocates are urging full funding for PEPFAR, so the initiative can tackle the growing crisis of HIV-TB co-infection, and a tripling of the U.S. contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

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