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Research: AIDS develops rapidly in infected infants

STOCKHOLM, Sweden (AP) — Forty percent of infants born with the AIDS virus develop the disease or a related illness by the time they are 10 months old, researchers said Tuesday.

By contrast, studies of AIDS infections in adults show that it takes about nine years for 40 percent of an infected group to develop the AIDS disease, researchers said at the Fourth International Conference on AIDS.

In the largest study done of AIDS transmission to newborns, European researchers followed for up to two years 219 infants of mothers with AIDS.

It appears that 25 percent to 30 percent of the babies will themselves be infected with the virus.

Of the infected infants, 40 percent will go on to develop AIDS or a related illness, said the study's director, Dr. Catherine Peckham of the Institute of Child Health in London.

That rate is considerably lower than earlier studies about the AIDS virus had suggested, she said.

The reason is that earlier studies concentrated only on infants who were visibly sick or born to mothers who had already had an AIDS-infected child.

The rate of infection would be unusually high in those studies because they focused on children who were determined to be most likely to get sick from the virus.

The European study includes all infants born to infected mothers, Peckham said.

"The main conclusion is that a majority of the children are well," she said in an interview.

Dr. James Goedert of the U.S. National Cancer Institute confirmed that the transmission rates in the European study are comparable to rates being seen in the United States.

A study to be reported Wednesday by Dr. Sheldon Landesman and others at the State University of New York in Brooklyn found an infection rate of at least 40 percent in newborns of mothers with the AIDS virus.

An important problem in such studies is the difficulty of diagnosing infants infected with the virus, Peckham said.

There is no test to separate infants who are infected from those who are merely carrying AIDS antibodies they received from their mothers before birth.

Such antibodies can remain in the infants' bloodstreams up to 15 months — even if the children are not infected, Peckham said.

"Until that clears up, you can't tell whether they're infected," she said in an interview.

"It's very difficult to make an early diagnosis."

Goedert noted that it is also impossible to be sure that the infants who lose the antibodies are not infected.

"The biggest uncertainty is how to interpret that," he said.

"A fair portion of those children do have health problems," he said, but it is not clear whether those problems reflect infection with the AIDS virus or simply other health related problems.

On Wednesday, Dr. Steven Wolinsky of Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. will report that it may be possible to identify AIDS virus genetic material and thus confirm AIDS infections before the mother's antibodies disappear from the child.

Wolinsky is experimenting with the so-called PCR, or polymerase chain reaction test, which appears to provide a very sensitive means for detecting the AIDS virus even in the infant situation.

Peckham and her colleagues began their study more than two years ago.

The 219 infants being followed come from eight European cities, including some where drug abuse is unusually high.

The mothers range in age from 16 to 38, and 98 percent of them are white.

Eighty-six percent are intravenous drug abusers, and 52 of the children have shown signs of drug withdrawal.

Ten infants have had AIDS or AIDS-related-complex, a disease that sometimes precedes the AIDS virus, and half of them have died.

Sixteen infants showed signs of illness but did not have AIDS or AIDS-related complex.

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National Briefs

Officers clean up drug-infested streets

WASHINGTON (AP) — New York City police were making thousands of undercover arrests in the drug-infested Lower East Side, but frightened residents were unaware of their presence, Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward told senators at a hearing Tuesday.

So Ward sent in uniformed officers, who sometimes turned on their sirens simply to announce to

the residents they had arrived in the neighborhood. He brought in police dogs who couldn't smell a barrel of cocaine, but barked like hell.

Testifying before a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on drug enforcement, Ward said he now believes that use of uniformed officers on neighborhood streets is the most important type of drug enforcement operation.

Pravda opens to critical comments

MOSCOW (AP) — The Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* on Tuesday opened its pages to critics who charged that the party shares the guilt for Josef Stalin's abuses and for fostering corruption and disillusionment in Soviet society.

A full page of comments by participants in a round-table discussion at the Institute of Marx-

ism-Leninism backed the party Central Committee's call in May for redefinition of the party's role in Soviet society.

The commentary came one day after the Soviet Supreme Court cleared three Bolsheviks — Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev and Karl Radek — of the crimes for which they were shot or imprisoned in the 1930s.

Capital punishment takes 100th life

ANGOLA, La. (AP) — A man who used a hammer to kill a woman he romanced went calmly to his death Tuesday in Louisiana's electric chair, the 100th person executed in this country since capital punishment was reinstated in the 1970s.

Asked if he had a final statement, Edward Byrne Jr. appeared to say "Nope." A window

separated him from reporters who witnessed his death.

Byrne, 28, insisted he never intended to kill Roberta Johnson in August 1984, only to rob her.

"I just attempted to knock her unconscious," Byrne said at a last-minute hearing before the state Pardon Board on Monday. "It didn't work. She didn't become unconscious. I just kept hitting her until she died."

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