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DO AMERICANS THINK THE AIDS EPIDEMIC IS “OVER”?

MANY SEE PROGRESS IN FIGHT AGAINST THE DISEASE, YET SUPPORT STILL STRONG FOR SPENDING ON PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

Though Still Number One, AIDS Now Tied with Cancer As Nation’s Most Urgent Health Problem

WASHINGTON, DC -- As new drugs have become available to help people with AIDS/HIV live longer, advocates have worried that the public will perceive the epidemic as “over,” while others have questioned whether AIDS should receive special status among the nation’s health concerns. Sixteen years since the beginning of the epidemic, a new survey finds that while Americans see growing progress in the fight against the disease, they also continue to view AIDS as an urgent health problem for the nation and still strongly support spending on prevention, research, and treatment.

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey released today, the public is far from thinking the AIDS epidemic is “over:” the vast majority -- 88 percent -- give an emphatic no. But, a majority of Americans (52%) now do see the country making progress in addressing the problems of AIDS. Only a third (32%) were as optimistic in 1995, when the Foundation surveyed Americans on AIDS/HIV. And, in 1994, it was just a quarter (23%), according to a Times Mirror survey. Even so, the public continues to rank AIDS among the most serious health concerns facing the nation; although, it is now seen as more comparable with other diseases. Today, the same percentages of Americans name AIDS (38%) as name cancer (38%) when asked what is the most urgent health problem facing the nation. Two years ago, AIDS was ranked first by 44 percent of the public, followed by cancer with 27 percent. In 1990, 49 percent of the public said AIDS, and 31 percent, cancer, according to a *Los Angeles Times* poll.

“After more than a decade of fighting this deadly disease, Americans are learning to live with AIDS. While the public continues to see AIDS as an urgent issue, it is no longer viewed as an emergent one,” said Sophia Chang, MD, MPH, Director of HIV Programs, Kaiser Family Foundation.

Support for government spending to help pay for drug therapies for low-income people with AIDS is especially strong. Three quarters (73%) of Americans say the government should help pay for new AIDS treatments regardless of income-level; 20 percent say the responsibility should be left to individuals and their families. Two thirds (64%) support spending even when told it would result in higher costs to the government; 29 percent say the government cannot afford it.

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Overall, a majority (51%) of the American people say the government spends too little money on AIDS (32% say “about the right amount;” 8% say “too much”). Forty percent (40%) say federal spending on AIDS is too low, as compared to what is spent on other health problems such as cancer and heart disease (35% say “about the right amount;” 11% say “too high”). This is down from 1995, when 50 percent of Americans said not enough was spent on fighting the disease as compared to what is spent on other health concerns (31% said “about the right amount;” 12% said “too high”). Still, there remain high levels of support today for spending in all areas of AIDS education, prevention, and treatment. When asked to choose a “top priority” for HIV spending, the public favors devoting resources to research to find an AIDS vaccine (47%), followed by HIV/AIDS education and other prevention efforts (32%).

The survey also finds that most people -- 89 percent -- think that by now all adults should know how to protect themselves from HIV infection, and 71 percent think those who become infected today are more responsible for their circumstances than those infected earlier. While public sentiment leans toward greater personal responsibility, the public’s attitude toward people with AIDS is not punitive: a majority -- 54 percent -- do not think that adults with AIDS/HIV should have to pay more of their medical bills themselves than those infected years ago; 42 percent say should have to pay more today.

Trends in AIDS/HIV. For the first time this decade, in February of 1997, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced a decline in AIDS deaths in the United States. Deaths from AIDS among Americans, ages 13 and older, declined 23 percent between 1995 and 1996. Declines were reported in all geographic areas, among men and women, among all racial and ethnic groups, and in all risk and exposure categories. The number of Americans living with AIDS -- almost a quarter of a million today -- increased by 11 percent over the same time period. This increase in people living with AIDS comes at a time when new drug therapies are available to help treat the disease and lengthen life. Protease inhibitors, a class of drug commonly used in combination therapies to treat people with HIV/AIDS, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration for use in this country in December 1995. The use of zidovudine (AZT) to prevent the transmission of HIV from mother to child also appears to be having an impact. New AIDS cases as a result of mother to child transmissions were recently reported to have decreased by 43 percent between 1992 and 1996.

New Drug Therapies. More people today (86%) than two years ago (75%) know that drug therapies are available to help people with AIDS live longer. The public is also more aware today that certain drugs can be taken by pregnant women with HIV to help prevent transmission to their babies: 49 percent today, as compared to 30 percent in 1995.

Awareness about the availability of new drugs may be one reason the public sees progress in the fight against AIDS: 44 percent of Americans today say “a lot” of progress has been made in keeping people with AIDS alive longer, up from 24 percent in 1995. However, most people believe that the new drugs do not benefit everyone with AIDS/HIV: 79 percent say most people who want the treatments are not getting them, and 58 percent say they are not effective for most people who are taking them. The public also appears to have a realistic understanding of the high cost of the new drugs: 42 percent know the average monthly expense can be as high as \$1000; 30 percent think it is closer to \$500 per month.

In spite of greater awareness about the drug therapies, the percentage of Americans who report having been tested for HIV has remained relatively constant over the last two years. Currently, two out of five people (38%) say they have ever been tested for HIV, including 16 percent in the last year; about the same percentages as reported being tested in 1995. Just 20 percent of those surveyed say they have ever talked with a health care provider about getting tested for HIV; two thirds (66%) of whom say they brought the topic up themselves.

Needle Exchange. Over the two years the Foundation has surveyed the public on needle exchange, Americans have remained supportive of these programs, which offer clean needles to IV drug users in exchange for used needles, as an AIDS prevention measure. As of the end of November, 64 percent of the public favor needle exchange and 30 percent oppose. Earlier in the fall when the Foundation surveyed on needle exchange, 58 percent supported and 38 percent opposed such programs. Two years earlier, 66 percent supported needle exchange, and 30 percent opposed.

Public opinion on needle exchange, however, appears to be influenced by how the issue is presented. When presented with the major arguments for and against needle exchange (including the criticism that needle exchange programs give tacit approval of illegal drug use) the differences level out: in November, 48 percent support and 46 percent oppose. A few months earlier, 43 percent support and 53 percent oppose needle exchange when given these same arguments. Better knowledge of the scientific evidence on needle exchange, on the other hand, appears to increase support. After hearing that organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences have concluded that needle exchange programs reduce HIV infection among IV drug users without increasing their drug use, support for the programs in the most recent survey increases. Among the first group, those asked about needle exchange without arguments, support increases from 64 percent to 73 percent (20% still oppose); among those given both sides of the argument, support increases from 48 percent to 60 percent (32% still oppose). (This question was not asked in the earlier surveys.)

Today, a majority of Americans -- 61 percent -- think current law should be changed to allow state and local governments to decide for themselves whether federal funds should be used for needle exchange.

Other Prevention Efforts. Americans support efforts to encourage condom use to help stop the spread of HIV:

62 percent say the TV networks should accept condom advertising (33% say should not);

55 percent say when movies and TV shows deal with sexual relationships there should be more references to condoms (32% say there are enough references now); and

44 percent say condoms should be made available in high schools, and another 52 percent say only information about AIDS prevention should be provided (1% oppose both).

Parents, Kids, and AIDS

The theme for this year's World AIDS Day, held on Monday, December 1, was "Give Children Hope in a World with AIDS." According to the Kaiser Family Foundation survey, parents remain a worried group about AIDS, especially when it comes to their children: 52 percent of those with children 21 and younger say they are "very concerned" about their son or daughter becoming infected with HIV, and an additional 21 percent say they are "somewhat concerned." Close to half -- 46 percent say their concerns have heightened from just a few years ago. Most parents -- 57 percent -- say they need more information about what to discuss with their children about AIDS.

When it comes to other AIDS prevention efforts, parents are among the most supportive: 47 percent favor providing condoms in high schools; 64 percent say more references to condoms should be included in movies and television shows that deal with sexual relationships; and 66 percent think condom ads should be aired on network television. In total, 97 percent think some information about AIDS and how it is spread should be provided to teens in high school.

Methodology

The Kaiser Family Foundation's *1997 National Survey of Americans on AIDS/HIV* is a random-sample survey of 1205 adults, 18 years and older. It was designed by staff at the Foundation and conducted by telephone by Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) between September 17 and October 19, 1997. Additional questions were asked as part of a national omnibus telephone survey of 1,009 adults conducted November 20-23, 1997. The margin of sampling error for both national samples are plus or minus 3 percent. The margin of sampling error may be higher for some of the sub-sets in this analysis.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is an independent national health care philanthropy and not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. The Foundation's work is focused on four main areas: health policy, reproductive health, and HIV in the United States, and health and development in South Africa.

Copies of the questionnaire and top line data for the findings reported in this release available by calling the Kaiser Family Foundation's publication request line at 1-800-656-4533 (Ask for #1346). Also available is the top line data from the Kaiser Family Foundation's *1995 National Survey of Americans on AIDS/HIV* (Ask for #1118).