

## HIV in Europe: a long road still lies ahead

In the run up to World AIDS Day on Dec 1 the usual flurry of publications surfaced. One example was the joint report from European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and WHO entitled *HIV/AIDS Surveillance in Europe 2018*. From the outset the expectations of the reader were heavily managed; the press release accompanying the report began “With nearly 160 000 people newly diagnosed with HIV, 2017 marked another year of alarming numbers of new HIV diagnoses in the WHO European Region”. It then attempted to sound upbeat: “Encouragingly, the overall increasing trend is not as steep as before”. Clearly if this is your positive highlight then there is little to celebrate.

Some of the sober tone might reflect recent suggestions that political support was being lost due to overly triumphant language. There was the fear that some of the messages around HIV were being mistakenly interpreted as the battle being largely won. A closer look at the data confirms that this report does not provide grounds for excessive optimism. The report highlights that more than half of the people diagnosed with HIV in 2017 in the European region had advanced disease, a sign that systematic barriers are yet to be overcome. There was some subregional variation among those diagnosed with advanced disease: it was highest in the east of the region (57%). However, the implication that other regions are doing much better does not really bear scrutiny, as the west of the region was still late to diagnose 49% of patients.

In terms of new diagnoses, the picture was more varied at the national level. In the European Union and the European Economic Area, several countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and the UK) recently reported a decline in rates of new diagnoses, whereas rates of diagnoses in certain other countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, and Poland) had substantially increased. But once that analysis was broadened out to cover the entire WHO European Region it was clear that Russia and Ukraine are where the greatest burden lies: contributing 75% of all cases across the region. So, overall, the negatives outweighed the positives, leading to the report’s conclusion: “Estimated new infections, currently at an historic high, would need to decrease by 78% by 2020 for the region to achieve the target”. The

target referred to is SDG 3.3, which, among other things, calls for the end of the AIDS epidemic.

Given the need to accelerate progress maybe it is time for new initiatives. One such approach announced in time for World AIDS Day by WHO and the International Labour Organization was the promotion of HIV self-testing at the workplace. The aim of this initiative was to provide more opportunities for testing but also to make testing more accessible to groups who might not otherwise have access to it—ie, seasonal workers and migrants. This announcement reflected the 2018 theme of World AIDS Day: know your status. A quarter of people living with HIV are unaware of their status and many of these people are men, who, for various reasons, are less likely to access testing. The announcement suggests that workplace testing might be an effective way to reach these people. Once they are aware of their status then the journey of managing their infection can begin. Ensuring access to testing complements the findings of the ECDC/WHO report, which calls for new strategies to decrease the number of people who are diagnosed late or are unaware of their infection. The report finds that the European region has “limited or non-existent” programmes for community based testing, self testing, and voluntary partner notification.

However, the scale of the challenge suggests that programmatic solutions alone will not be enough to tackle HIV. A more radical intervention, like a vaccine, could be what finally tips the balance. In a recent article in *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* Joris Hemelaar and colleagues attempt to lay the essential groundwork for vaccine development. Through their analysis they provide an estimate of the global and regional distribution of HIV-1 subtypes and recombinants. This information could accelerate the development of a vaccine by helping to avoid the pitfalls of testing it against non-susceptible forms of the virus and also focusing efforts on producing a vaccine that is more targeted against the commonest forms.

2018 marked the 30th annual World AIDS Day, and there have been many successes in that time. Despite—or perhaps because of—the progress achieved, there is a danger of complacency in the response to HIV and the risk of waning political support.

■ *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*



For the ECDC/WHO report see <https://ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/hivaids-surveillance-europe-2018-2017-data>

For the Article by Hemelaar and colleagues see *Lancet Infect Dis* 2018; published online Nov 30. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(18\)30647-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(18)30647-9)