

Fed: WA Aboriginal women 18 times at risk of HIV: study

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Aboriginal women in Western Australia are 18 times more likely to be infected with HIV than their non-indigenous counterparts, a study has found.

The study has sparked concerns about the potential for an HIV epidemic among West Australian Aborigines unless the problem is addressed.

Aboriginal health researcher Michael Wright and colleagues studied HIV infection in the West Australian indigenous community between 1994 and 2002, reporting their findings in the latest Medical Journal of Australia (MJA).

Of 421 notifications of HIV infection in West Australian residents during the period, 52 were among Aborigines.

"More than half of all indigenous HIV infections were in women and most of those were heterosexually acquired," the researchers wrote.

"Indigenous females were 18 times more likely to be infected than non-indigenous females, and three times more likely than non-indigenous males."

Indigenous men were twice as likely as other men to be infected with HIV.

The researchers noted that while HIV notifications for the non-indigenous population in Western Australia declined between 1985 and 2002, rates in the Aboriginal community increased.

They suggested similarities between HIV infection in West Australian Aborigines and that observed in sub-Saharan Africa.

"Heterosexual intercourse is the main route for HIV transmission, and women have greater vulnerability for acquiring HIV," the authors said.

"There is a strong relationship between poverty and HIV, with young people living in poverty highly vulnerable to infection.

"Poverty and marginalisation affect many of the HIV-infected indigenous people in WA, with health providers reporting that many people diagnosed with HIV in recent years have been homeless, unemployed and had other chronic health issues, including mental illness and alcohol dependency."

The researchers said while Western Australia was well positioned to prevent an HIV epidemic among its indigenous population, "the clock is ticking".

In an editorial published in the same issue of the journal, Francis Bowden of the Australian National University in Canberra said the findings demanded attention.

Professor Bowden said the concept of "sexual health" was a construct usually confined to well-resourced urban populations.

"Few indigenous children in remote areas complete high school and, as a result, there are few reliable means of informing young people about health risks," he wrote.

"Although many Aboriginal Health Services have instituted local programs of distribution, condom use appears to be uncommon, and there is anecdotal evidence of an increase in injection drug use in remote areas."

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