

The Aids epidemic has been massively overstated, UN experts admit

By DAVID GARDNER - 21st November 2007, Daily Mail

Top scientists at the United Nations have finally admitted they have long overblown the scale of the global Aids epidemic.

Flying in the face of its own doomsday forecasts of an ever-expanding Aids nightmare, a UN report published today reveals that the threat has been declining for nearly a decade.

Estimates of the worldwide number of people living with HIV have been slashed from last year's figure of nearly 40million to 33million.

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AIDS activists protest outside the premises of a South African pharmaceutical company

New infections have also been calculated at 2.5million, a cut of more than 40 per cent from last year's estimate.

While Aids activists have warned in the past that all sections of society are at risk, the UN Aids agency's latest annual report says that in most parts of the world, outbreaks of the disease are mostly concentrated in gay men, intravenous drug users and prostitutes.

The statistical U-turn was hailed last night as a victory for critics who have been complaining for years that the epidemic was being hugely overstated to draw political and financial support to combat the disease.

"They've finally got caught with their pants down," said Dr Jim Chin, a California professor who has long claimed that political correctness has skewered Aids projections.

Over the past 10 years, global spending on Aids has soared to as much as £5billion a year.

Just a year ago, Peter Piot, the Belgian scientist who has headed the UN Aids agency since its founding in 1995, warned that "the pandemic and its toll are outstripping the worst predictions".

Now the UN says its previous estimates were largely based on the numbers of infected women at ante-natal clinics, as well as projecting the Aids rates among certain high-risk groups.

The crisis peaked in the late Nineties and the number of people living with Aids is levelling out, says the report, which suggests the percentage of the world's population affected is now in decline.

It has revised its figure for Aids sufferers in India from six million to three million.

Two-thirds of new infections were recorded in sub-Saharan Africa. However, calculations of the overall number with HIV in the region - where three-quarters of the world's Aids deaths have occurred - was down by 1.7million this year.

But last night Paul De Lay, director of monitoring and evaluation at UN Aids, warned that the condition is resurgent in the UK, America and Germany.

"The epidemic is just waiting to come back if programmes are reduced," he added.

Daniel Halperin, an Aids expert at the Harvard School of Public Health, said governments face a dilemma.

"On the one hand, it would be a mistake to radically decrease funding for HIV. But on the other hand, why not put more money into family planning or climate change?"