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HIV DIAGNOSES NOT SLOWING DOWN

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``Someone is infected with HIV every six seconds."

The crowd got quiet. So Dr. **Rebecca Kuhn** said it again. It was only one of a string of shocking statistics that Kuhn, a doctor of internal medicine and HIV specialist at St. Mary Medical Center, railed off at an AIDS education workshop for women Tuesday.

At the end of 2004, 39.4 million people were estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS, according to the World Health Organization. Of these, 17.6 million were women and 2.2 million were children.

From 1999 through 2003, the annual number of estimated AIDS diagnoses in the United States increased 15 percent among women and rose 1 percent among men, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And while the number of white people contracting the chronic disease is decreasing, it's climbing among African-American women.

In fact, Kuhn pointed out, while African-American women represent only 12 percent of the population in the United States, they represent 70 percent of the country's HIV-positive women.

And despite efforts to increase awareness worldwide, an estimated 4.9 million people were infected with the virus in 2004, compared to an estimated 4.8 million in 2003.

``What's up with the fact that the number isn't going down," Kuhn asked.

``Do you wonder?"

The audience collectively nodded yes.

``I do, too," she said.

So what's the solution?

The doctor spoke in impassioned tones, but stopped short of dwelling on the source of the trends, settling instead on a simple statement.

``Whatever it is," she said firmly, ``it's got to stop."

While men make up the vast majority -- 91 percent -- of the 4,799 HIV/AIDS cases reported in Long Beach through June 2004, a report released by the Health Department last June showed that an increasing number of women are becoming infected. The number of new female cases rose about 2.5 percent from July 2003 to June 2004, compared with the same period the previous year.

Kuhn pushed for increased education and urged people to assume responsibility and accountability for safe sex.

And for those who are HIV-positive, she stressed the importance of taking medication.

“Adherence is huge,” Kuhn said. “Take your medications and take your medications and take your medications correctly.”

“Am I getting too preachy?” she asked and smiled. “There’s a bunch of church people in here and I haven’t heard one amen yet.”

“Amen, sister,” a voice piped in from the audience.

Linda Young, a service counselor who does HIV testing, also preached on the importance of educating children early about both the virus and the importance of safe sex.

“We need to get real serious about talking to our young people,” she said.

Young, who said she’s struck by how misinformed some teenagers can be, recalled a 17-year-old girl asking to be tested for HIV after kissing a boy at a party.

“I was like, girl, this disease has been around longer than you have,” she said.

“And how is it you don’t know about it? ... It grieves my spirit.”