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The Black Death and HIV/AIDS

For western Europeans, the Black Death was one of the most devastating diseases in history. Today the world faces what may be an even greater threat to the health of millions of people: the HIV/AIDS **pandemic**.

The virus that causes HIV/AIDS destroys the immune system, which protects the body from disease. The virus passes from person to person primarily through sexual activity. It can also spread through the sharing of hypodermic needles, and mothers who are infected can pass the disease on to their children at birth. A cure for HIV/AIDS has not yet been discovered.

The first case of HIV/AIDS was reported in Africa in the early 1980s. Since then, the disease has spread to countries in Europe and North America, including Canada. By the beginning of the 21st century, the disease had spread worldwide.

A United Nations agency called UNAIDS believes that we are only at the beginning of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This agency researches the spread of HIV/AIDS and it believes that over the next two decades, at least 68 million people will die of HIV/AIDS. The majority of these deaths will occur in the poorest countries in the world. UNAIDS estimates there are 40 million people in the world living with HIV/AIDS, including three million children. Africa is the continent hardest hit by HIV/AIDS. The majority of infections and deaths are in central and southern Africa. In one African country, Botswana, 39 per cent of adults are infected with the virus.

While there is still no cure for HIV/AIDS, in some cases the disease can be controlled with medication. A mixture of drugs, referred to as “drug cocktails,” can be effective in prolonging the life of HIV/AIDS sufferers. The drugs are expensive, however, and many sufferers cannot afford to buy them. There are approximately 730 000 HIV/AIDS sufferers receiving the drug cocktails, but only 30 000 of these are Africans. The president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, has warned that poverty is the world’s biggest killer because people cannot afford to buy the drugs they need. If he is correct, the UNAIDS estimates of numbers of people who could become infected in the future, may have to be revised upward.

pandemic: epidemics that occur over a wide geographic area

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. In a two-column organizer, compare and contrast the Black Death and the HIV/AIDS pandemics. Consider causes, numbers infected, regions affected, and treatments.

2. In several African countries, over 10 per cent of the population is infected with HIV/AIDS. How do you think this situation would affect people's daily lives?
3. Many people have complained that not enough money is being spent on finding a way to bring the HIV/AIDS pandemic under control. Compose a radio advertisement that brings the need to deal with the HIV/AIDS pandemic to the attention of the public.
4. Why should Canadians be concerned with the rapid growth of HIV/AIDS in the world's poorest countries?