

A cruel irony

When some AIDS patients live longer, others die sooner

By DANA CALVO
Associated Press

TIJUANA, Mexico — Every Thursday, Fred Scholl fills an old travel bag with AIDS medicines. The pills are leftovers, no longer needed by patients who have died. Then he drives his battered, gray Mazda south across the U.S.-Mexico border to a clinic with one examining table and eight chairs where 240 infected Mexicans line up for the AIDS-suppressing medicines.

But Scholl's bag has become alarmingly light in the last year as more and more Americans with AIDS stave off death, at least temporarily, and continue courses of drugs some consider miraculous.

"Two years ago, we had so much medicine that we were sending it to clinics all over Mexico," Scholl says, standing behind the drug counter of the only AIDS clinic in Tijuana that can offer medicine to combat the virus. "Now, I'm just barely able to keep up with the demand."

Scholl, a pharmacist by training, now a realtor, helped establish Clinica ACOSIDA (Alliance Against AIDS) 10 years ago. On his weekly trips to the clinic, he used to bring dozens of bottles of AZT, the most common AIDS-fighting drug. One recent evening, he carried only four bottles of partially consumed prescriptions. His six-month back-up supply has dwindled to six weeks' worth.

Fear of resistance

Beyond the immediate fear of losing patients because they have no medicine, health workers on both sides of the border worry about the worst-case possibility, that the deadly virus will gather resistance to effective treatments because they are interrupted or halted.

John Ward, chief of HIV/AIDS Surveillance at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, says AIDS adapts swiftly to drugs, especially if they are intermittently administered.

"Anytime you interrupt treatment, there's the concern of the emergence of resistance," he says. "By stopping the treatment you give the virus a chance to recover. It replicates faster."

Health officials from San Diego County and Tijuana met in February. "We spoke of this exact problem, but the obstacle is the economy," says Nelson Bonilla, director of Tijuana's only government-run AIDS clinic. "We cannot provide these medications."

His small clinic and group

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Skip Rosenthal
U.S. - Mexico Border Health Association

therapy program has "not one peso" for AIDS-fighting medicine, he said. His patients receive free HIV testing, AIDS counseling and treatment for infections, such as tuberculosis and pneumonia.

"On the border, some have their medicine, but they are all from American donations. Here," he says, gesturing to his small office, "we don't have a choice because they're not accessible. It is too costly."

A month's supply of AZT in northern Mexico ranges from \$150 to \$448, putting it out of reach for nearly everyone, including the government.

In the United States, federal assistance or health insurance picks up the pharmaceutical tab of most AIDS treatments. One month's supply of AZT costs about \$290. The so-called AIDS "cocktail," a mixture of AIDS-fighting medications including the promising new protease inhibitors, can run \$1,200 a month, depending on the combination.

In February, the CDC reported that the number of AIDS deaths in the United States had fallen significantly for the first time since the epidemic began in 1981. Statistics from San Diego County reflect the nationwide figures, with deaths dropping from 615 in 1995 to 362 in 1996.

Experts say it is too early to link the drop-off to protease inhibitors because the drugs were introduced only a year ago. But Scholl and Mexican health care providers say whatever the reasons, the good news north of the border may mean increasing tragedy to its south.

"We've had people who come with prescriptions that we just can't fill," says Jose Navarro, another ACOSIDA founder. "It's going to be very critical for us — the more medication they have up there the less resources we'll have down here."

No support

While Mexico's lagging AIDS treatment can largely be attributed to economic drawbacks, patients and caretakers must also battle an

entrenched "machismo" culture that associates AIDS with homosexuality and responds with derision or denial.

In Mexico, no one can state the incidence of AIDS because the government doesn't collect such statistics. In Tijuana, a city of 1.7 million, about the size of Houston, no hospital has an AIDS ward.

At funerals for people with AIDS, caskets are closed because morticians will not prepare the corpses.

"The taboo against even talking about it is unbelievable," says Skip Rosenthal, who works for the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Association in El Paso, Texas. He has taken donated medicine to neighboring Ciudad Juarez for about five years.

"In Mexico, especially on the border, if you're HIV-positive the only treatment accessible, maybe, is vitamins," Rosenthal says.

While he's been able to tuck away some pharmaceutical prizes for his 150 patients, Rosenthal knows the donations could stop anytime.

"We've even been able to get some protease inhibitors, but we're very uncomfortable with it because we can never guarantee they will continue coming down," he says.

Waiting and hoping

In Tijuana, Scholl's patients quietly wait in line for the precious AIDS-fighting drugs.

Leaning on a wooden cane, 26-year-old Efrain Flores is wasting away with full-blown AIDS. When his turn comes, he'll be given a plastic bag filled with bottles of medicines from dead patients. New handwritten labels are taped over the old typewritten prescriptions.

It is illegal in the United States to redistribute or administer medicine prescribed to another person. But for Scholl, it is a "no brainer" to bring them to Mexico.

"You had people dying, leaving behind a lot of medication," he says. "And 18 miles south of the border, you had people dying right and left because they had no medical supplies."

Missing warplane likely found in Colo.

EAGLE, Colo. (AP) — A helicopter crew hovering beside a sheer cliff in the central Rocky Mountains found what is likely the wreckage of a missing bomb-laden warplane, but saw no sign of the pilot, the Air Force said Sunday.

Because of high winds, a ground crew could not be sent in to examine the wreckage stuck in the snow. The search could begin today.

"It is our collective judgment that what we have seen is likely to be A-10 airplane pieces," Maj. Gen. Nels Running said, adding that he is 99.9 percent sure it was Capt. Craig Button's A-10 Thunderbolt.

The plane has been missing since April 2, when Button, 32, took off from a Tucson, Ariz., base on a routine training mission and veered north, heading to Colorado with four bombs aboard.

An Army National Guard helicopter crew spotted the wreckage while hovering within 30 feet of the steep cliff.

A close-up look revealed pieces of gray painted metal that could have

been from the plane's interior and several smaller pieces of metal, Running said. Yellow-green paint used as an anti-corrosion coating inside the airplane was also visible, he said.

"Our next step will be to determine with certainty that the sighted wreckage is in fact our missing aircraft," Running said. "We will need to get some pieces to make that absolutely certain."

There was no sign of Button, who could have ejected without the Air Force's knowledge.

The Air Force plans to suspend a military search team from a helicopter to collect pieces of wreckage and look for Button's remains.

The wreckage was spotted on an unnamed cliff near New York Mountain and Gold Dust Peak, mountains 13,000 feet high, about 15 miles southwest of Vail.

Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officers Richard Rugg of Denver and Dale Jensen of Eagle discovered the wreckage in a site they had previously examined. Snow has melted in the area since it was last searched.

Netanyahu not indicted

JERUSALEM (AP) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu escaped indictment in an influence-peddling scandal Sunday, with prosecutors saying they lacked evidence to try him on fraud and breach-of-trust charges despite his "puzzling" conduct.

Netanyahu, his reputation and credibility damaged, still faces a political crisis that reduces the likelihood of progress in the limping peace process with the Palestinians. Opposition leaders urged him to step down and call new elections, and coalition parties were considering whether to bolt.

The prosecution's 52-page report was critical, but fell short of the political earthquake predicted after po-

lice recommended charges last week.

"The decision is to close — for lack of sufficient evidence — the case against the prime minister," Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein said at a news conference.

Rubinstein said evidence provided by police suggested that Netanyahu might have appointed Roni Bar-On as attorney general to satisfy a coalition ally who is facing a corruption trial.

Netanyahu's actions "raised puzzling questions," he said. "From the evidence there is suspicion that there were other (than legitimate) considerations" in the appointment. "But we don't think this can be proved beyond a reasonable doubt."

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