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Experts challenge U.S. report on AIDS forecasting decline

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A study indicates that the number of new AIDS cases each year will decline in the United States, but two federal researchers say the conclusion is flawed.

The study, carried in yesterday's *Journal of the American Medical Association*, says emerging cases will continue to decrease "to a still-to-be-determined but probably low endemic level before the year 2000."

The work of Dennis Bregman and Alexander Langmuir of the University of Southern California was criticized in two editorials in the journal written by researchers for the federal Centers for Disease Control and the National Cancer Institute.

The editor of the journal, Dr. George Lundberg, said yesterday that while it is unusual for the journal to carry two editorials criticizing a study, experts in the field felt the Bregman-Langmuir study warranted consideration.

"Three world-class peer reviewers urged us to publish the Bregman paper," Dr. Lundberg said. "We think there's at least a possibility that this historic approach could be right. Only time will tell!"

The Bregman-Langmuir study used a statistical model called Farr's Law of Epidemics, first used in 1840. The model states that epidemics tend to rise and fall symmetrically in a normal, bell-shaped curve.

Using data from the Atlanta-based CDC, the report says 920 cases of AIDS were reported in 1982, followed by increases in new cases each year until 1987, the last complete year available for statistics, with 19,333 new cases.

Using Farr's Law, they then project 21,978 new cases in 1988, 21,604 in 1989 and 18,363 in 1990. Following the same curve, they say the number of new cases would continue declining, reaching 921 in 1995. By this time, they project that the total number of U.S. cases of the deadly disease will have reached 200,000.

Through January, the CDC has reported 121,645 cases in the United States since AIDS reporting began in 1981. The disease has killed 72,580 of those patients.

Dr. Bregman said the findings suggest a need for re-evaluating AIDS strategy.

"If you continue to focus on the increasing number of cases, then it draws attention away from focusing on the emerging, persistent endemic problem in our community," he said in a telephone interview from Los Angeles.

In Geneva, meanwhile, Dr. Jonathan Mann, who ran the World Health Organization's fight against AIDS, resigned in a dispute with the United Nations agency's chief.

Dr. Mann said he and Hiroshi Nakajima, WHO's Japanese director-general, disagreed strongly on a series of vital issues.

Dr. Mann, an American, had directed the \$109-million-a-year program since its inception in June of 1986. His resignation, which takes effect in June, shocked many.

REFERENCE: Bregman, D.J. and A.D. Langmuir: Farr's Law Applied to AIDS Projections. *J. Amer. Med. Assoc.* 263 (#11): 1522-1525, March 16 (1990); see also the two editorials: Gail, M.H. and R. Brookmeyer: Projecting the Incidence of AIDS (pp. 1538-1539), and Morgan, M., Curran, J.W. and R.L. Berkelman: The Future Course of AIDS in the United States (pp. 1539-1540). Another article on AIDS projections appears on pp. 1497-1501. [DC Library call number: PER R15.A48]

The article EM9031 reprinted above is used in Figure 5.8 of the 220 Course Materials.