

UN should've fixed their stats long ago

IN TIME FOR WORLD AIDS DAY 2007 THIS Saturday, the United Nation's Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS released their latest Epidemic Update, tracking the latest statistics on the progress of the disease around the world. The results surprised a lot of people: the report says that approximately 33.2 million people have either HIV or AIDS, down from the previous estimate of 40 million.

There's rarely any good news on the AIDS front, so it's tempting to be cheered by these new numbers. In reality, though, the story's not nearly so rosy. The lower infection numbers don't mean that 7 million people suddenly got better, or even that fewer people are getting the disease. The reason the figures changed is that they've been getting them wrong for a long time, and only now changed their process to be more accurate. Consequently, one of the most important organizations in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS has suffered a huge blow to its credibility and distracted the public from the real issues of the epidemic.

For years, statisticians and epidemiologists have been criticizing UNAIDS for its methods and statistics. The problem seems mainly to be that, in many countries, they get their numbers by extrapolating infection rates from prenatal clinics in urban areas over large populations. This method tends to lead to overestimation of numbers—in some countries, the difference is as much 20 per cent.

Experts have been hounding UNAIDS to fix their process for years, and that they have only done so now makes them look ineffective and inept. Even if they've finally gotten it right, who's going to trust them?

It also makes it harder to track what progress, if any, we're making against this disease. The main purpose of the kind of information the Epidemic Update is supposed to provide is to let us analyze the progress of the virus and the results of prevention and treatment programs. By dragging their feet on the change of method, UNAIDS made it harder to track what was actually occurring. Though the report claims that rates of infection have levelled off in several high-risk countries, including Kenya and Zimbabwe, it's hard to make concrete evaluations because there's no equivalent data against which to compare the 2007 numbers.

Their blunder also means that instead of media outlets reporting on the dreadful facts of the AIDS epidemic, all that they're focusing on is the apparent decrease in the prevalence of the disease. However, the drop in numbers makes the reality no less horrific than it was before. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, there are 22.5 million people living with AIDS—61 per cent of whom are women—and 11.4 million AIDS orphans. That's 68 per cent of the world's AIDS patients, and the region accounts for 76 per cent of all AIDS deaths.

This is also a stain on the UN's record. They should have been more vigilant in analyzing their methods and results, especially considering that experts have been calling on them to do this for years. That they didn't look into those objections when they first arose makes the UN look lazy at best and, at worst, as if they've been manipulating statistics. They're leaving themselves open to criticism, stating that they intentionally highballed infection numbers to milk extra money for research. It's a ludicrous proposition, but that it's even been uttered goes to show how damaging inaccuracies and bad scholarship could be to the UN's reputation in the struggle against HIV/AIDS.

Trying to deal with this global crisis is an enormous and delicate undertaking. From the first discovery of the disease, it's been surrounded by controversy. In many societies—even ours—it's a taboo subject, and its victims are often ostracized. Even how best to prevent further spread of the epidemic is hotly contested. The last thing the fight against AIDS needs is more controversy. By making a mess of their statistical analysis, UNAIDS has just added to the confusion at a time when the fight against the virus needs clarity and straight-forward information.

Instead of being able to celebrate the wonderful news that the prevalence of infection might finally be going down in the world's worst-affected countries, we're left wondering and worrying about the accuracy of the UN's information. The real tragedy is that millions are dying from a disease with no cure; the UN's blunder shouldn't be allowed to distract from that.

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor



“It looks like the numbers have levelled off this year.”

MIKE KENDRICK

LETTERS

Butt out on Beijing butts

I'm writing to you in regards to Miss Kotovych's article on 27 November (re: "China doesn't like big butts, cannot lie"). In her work, Miss Kotovych has expressed her own opinion on whether the prestigious Olympics Committee shall impose certain physical restrictions on female hostess candidates. Personally, I have been offended by her words.

Firstly, if she knew a thing or two about the Nanjing Massacre and the Japanese Army's treatment of "comfort women," then she would've seen that comparing a female physique to a Japanese brand vehicle, Honda, is inappropriate. Also, I believe Miss Kotovych has forgotten that the purpose of hosting such an honourable, internationally recognized event is partly to share in the Chinese culture. Since the Chinese society takes pride in traditional beauty, is it wrong to share it with world—especially North Americans?

Miss Kotovych should consider herself privileged to be living in a country where freedom of speech is an individual's right. However, her article comes off pathetic as she expands two thirds of a column detailing her recent experience in matching up to standards of beauty.

Please do remind Miss Kotovych that the hostess position is no job for "the average Chinese woman." When you have a country with a population comparable to that of China, the chance to be in an internationally recognized event is not an "average" thing to do.

PS: I don't think that the Beijing Olympics Committee will listen to the work of Sir Mix-a-lot, as

the traditional Chinese culture has a little more class than explicitly abusing the woman's physical attributes.

L ZHANG
Via Email

Gateway forgot about Joe

(Re: "A history in residence," 27 November). I'm curious as to why Mr Vargas overlooked one of the campus residences. Especially the residence that has won the past 20 intramural cups, that serves as the Catholic ministry for the University, the only residence with a still-functional house committee, and that is nearly as old as the University itself.

Saint Joseph's College is at the center of campus, it's the home of the Rangers, it has long-standing tradition, and it most certainly has a lot of character. It's beyond me that you can mention residences that few have heard of and ignore a residence that is known around campus. The next time you cross the bus loop, take a look our way. Joe's may be a dinosaur, but we sure aren't extinct.

NICK STADNYK
Arts I

Letters to the editor should be sent to letters@gateway.ualberta.ca (no attachments, please).

The Gateway reserves the right to edit letters for length and clarity, and to refuse publication of any letter it deems racist, sexist, libelous, or otherwise hateful in nature. The Gateway also reserves the right to publish letters online.

Letters to the editor should be no longer than 350 words, and should include the author's name, program, year of study and student ID number to be considered for publication.

LETTERS FROM THE ARCHIVES

Sexism not that big an issue in this day and age

Why is it that only arts students have time to write long-winded letters on a non-issue such as sexism on campus? And why is it that this is the only subject about which letters are printed and editorials are written?

Perhaps the five people who are so concerned about this could get together and discuss the issue over tea. Meanwhile, the Gateway might focus some attention on some of the real problems facing students at the U of A. The very visible degradation of the quality of education on this campus over the last few years is an example.

ALEX VANZELLA
20 November, 1990

Editor's Note: The following letters from March of 1995 follow the opening of a store in HUB mall that purchased class notes from students for \$25.

I can sell notes if I want to; I can leave my profs behind

I'm writing about the protest staged in HUB Mall on 20 March, 1995 by a group of professors. I, like most people that morning, was interested in the commotion at the Vantage Notes store. When I refused to read the protesters' propaganda, I was told that I was a "silly young girl" and was threatened with having my picture taken.

I believe in the right to express a viewpoint publicly and in a rational manner, but I don't have to put up with abusive and harassing behaviour. The note service is great for students, and I don't mind selling my notes. Why shouldn't I make some money on my hard work? After all, I paid my tuition—which last time I checked, didn't pay for the teaching staff to insult students at large.

JUDITH ALTAREJOS
21 March, 1995

Note sales gives away all my teaching secrets

Open letter to profs regarding "Note sales draw fire," 21 March, 1995:

I'm convinced that the issue of selling notes in HUB presents the most serious challenge to academic freedom that the University has faced in over ten years.

You all know examples are used in class which aren't intended for simply anyone to hear—from Ralph Klein to your parents or children. Serious questioning of issues in the liberal arts requires the sanctity and trust of the classroom. No one says exactly the same thing to everyone (mom, grandma, priest, best friend, etc).

I am asking you to help us defend our ability to use shocking examples and striking illustrations.

I believe that this issue is at least as important to us in Arts as the issue of tenure. I ask for your support.

HEIDI STRUDER
23 March, 1995