

1987

## Women, Children and AIDS

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### Repository Citation

Guinan, M. (1987). Women, Children and AIDS. *Journal of the American Medical Women's Association*, 42 189-189. Reston, VA:

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## WOMEN'S HEALTH

### Women, children, and AIDS

*Mary E. Guinan, MD, PhD*

More than 500 cases of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) in children (ages 13 and under) had been reported to the Centers for Disease Control as of August 10, 1987. Of these children, 78% were infected perinatally by their mothers. The ratio of AIDS cases among women to AIDS cases among children has remained stable at approximately 5:1 for several years. So, for the foreseeable future, we can expect that for every five reports of women with AIDS, one child with AIDS will be reported. As is the case with other sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS causes a disproportionately greater burden for infected women than for infected men. The major reason: women are child bearers and can transmit infections to their offspring during either pregnancy or delivery. Tragically, most women who infect their children do so unknowingly. The infections are usually at an asymptomatic stage in the mother or are unrecognized and come to light only because the child's infection is discovered.

Much has been said about the emotional and psychological impact of finding out that one has been infected with the AIDS virus. Public health officials and advocacy groups have rightly emphasized the role of pre- and postcounseling of those tested for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). These counseling efforts are intended to help the patient understand the infection and cope with the outcome. Most of the women who have had HIV-infected infants probably have not had the benefit of this counseling. What an overwhelming experience it must be for them, not only to realize their own fates, but to face terminally ill children and recognize that, inadvertently, they were the source of infection. We know very little about how

these women cope. How many counseling programs are there that are specifically tailored to their needs. Very few, I believe.

We have no information on what women are likely to do when faced with this situation. Women with strong family support may be more likely to try and take care of them-

child care assistance programs are necessary. These programs should provide care for the child in all stages of infection, recognizing that the mother may be unable to contribute substantially or at all to her child's care. The need is greatest in New York, New Jersey, Florida, California, and Puerto Rico, areas with the

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selves and their infants. Others may be devastated by their physical or emotional needs or both. Unfortunately, the women most likely to be affected by AIDS have little family support. Newspaper accounts of HIV-infected infants that have been abandoned in hospitals illustrate one of the outcomes of this disastrous situation. Mothers may be too ill to care for their children or may die soon after the child is born. Child care for infants with HIV infection is a critical issue.

To help the mother with an HIV-infected child, strong, well-funded

greatest numbers of children with AIDS.

Although women account for only 7% of AIDS cases, the needs of women with AIDS must be addressed. The number and percentage of AIDS cases in women and children are expected to increase. Counseling for women who have HIV-infected children and child care for these children should be components of all community based AIDS programs.

*Dr. Guinan is acting assistant director for science at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.*

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