

HIV infections rise in Canada, fall globally

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TORONTO -- James Armstrong can't walk. He is blind in his left eye. He has survived cancer, kidney failure and numerous blood and lung infections, but he is happy to be alive.

The 45-year-old Toronto man has been on the verge of dying a dozen times since he began living with HIV in 1986.

In May, he agreed to be pulled off life support in the hospital while suffering from his third bout of pulmonary edema. Armstrong's doctor told him he would have 20 minutes left to live, yet he managed to survive.

"The doctor told my mom at my bedside before he left that it was an honour being my doctor for 12 years and to be sure to let him know when my funeral was -- but somehow I miraculously survived again," Armstrong, who lives at Casey House, said.

"I thought I was going to die several times. I attribute a lot of why I'm still here not just to the drugs and medical care, but to my whole family and my best friend Rob, who was always at my side."

The average time from infection to AIDS diagnosis exceeds 10 years. Armstrong is taking a cocktail of AIDS drugs and medication for his other conditions, but it's not known how much longer he will live. AIDS is fatal and there is no cure or vaccine.

Dec. 1 marks World AIDS Day. Since the epidemic began 25 years ago, the percentage of people worldwide who are living with HIV has levelled off and the number of new infections has fallen, according to a recent report from the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World Health Organization.

In 2007, there were an estimated 2.1 million deaths from AIDS, 33.2 million people living with HIV, and 2.5 million people who became infected. About 11 Canadians are infected every day. In Canada in 2005, there were an estimated 2,300 to 4,500 cases, compared to an estimated 2,100 to 4,000 in 2002. About 44 per cent of the people living with HIV in Canada are located in Ontario.

Bhagirath Singh, scientific director of infection and immunity at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, says Canada is not as hard hit as many countries. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 22.5 million HIV-infected people

"HIV/AIDS cases continue to grow, particularly in Canada's aboriginal peoples and people originally from countries where HIV is endemic," Singh said.

On Nov. 28 the federal funding for community AIDS programs in Ontario was cut by 30 per cent and redirected towards a Canadian HIV vaccine initiative. Researchers around the globe are racing to find an HIV vaccine and more powerful drug cocktails to slow the progression of the disease.