HIV Outbreak Reported in West Virginia

It mostly involved men who have sex with men, but the state also faces a major challenge with injection drug use.

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An HIV outbreak in southern West Virginia is under control, reports the Charleston Gazette-Mail. Most of the cases involved a network of men who have sex with men (MSM), and the men have been linked to care, said Rahul Gupta, MD, commissioner of the state Department of Health and Human Services.

The cases were spread across 15 counties and met the definition of an outbreak. Gupta declined to give a specific number of new HIV cases, stating that he didn't want to stigmatize people, especially those in smaller communities. But Christine Teague, program director for the Ryan White Program in Charleston, put the figure at between 10 and 15.

Gupta stressed that the number is a moving target, especially considering that the state is ranked No. 1 for new cases of hepatitis B and C, which are often transmitted by injection drug use.

Michael Brumage, MD, executive director of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department, told the newspaper that the state health department should be more forthcoming with the data. "When we're talking about an increase of HIV cases in a state with an IV drug use problem," he said, "then I think we need to be able to tell the public why syringe service programs are so important at this time, in fact, now more than ever."

Although most people affected by the current outbreak didn't report injection drug use, Brumage said, "it only takes one patient sharing needles with active HIV to infect others, and that is exactly how Scott County, Indiana, began with their problems."

Brumage was referencing a 2015 outbreak of HIV and hep C in rural Indiana linked to the opioid crisis and needle sharing. That outbreak, which occurred when Vice President Mike Pence was governor of the state, involved nearly 200 people. For more about that, click here and here or #Indiana.

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