Parents Refuse HIV Testing for Children in Burkina Faso, West Africa

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Health officials estimate that thousands of at-risk children in the West African country Burkina Faso are undiagnosed because their parents refuse to have them tested for HIV/AIDS, IRIN PlusNews reports. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than 400,000 children were newly infected with HIV worldwide in 2007, mostly through mother-to-child transmission either at birth or through breast milk.

According to UNAIDS, 10,000 children were living with HIV in Burkina Faso as of 2006. Research also shows only 46 percent of positive people in the sub-Saharan African country were receiving treatment in June 2009.

“We know the numbers [requiring treatment] are higher because of children who are born to HIV-positive mothers,” said Joseph André Bidiga, the director of health services for the government’s national HIV and sexually transmitted infections council. “We do not offer prevention of mother-to-child transmission [PMTCT] services in all our health centers.”

Pediatrician Alice Zoungrana, MD, with the Charles de Gaulle University Children’s Hospital in Ouagadougou said that most parents in Burkina Faso do not consider children to be at risk. “We are in 2009, and it is sad, but many families…still think [HIV] is a purely sexual disease that does not affect children,” she said, adding that while 75 percent of parents allow their children to be tested at the hospital—when the child has become ill—they are often reluctant to do so. “It takes time because [families] refuse and accept to test only when their children fall ill a second time. It is during the second hospitalization that they accept.”

Health authorities plan to repackage HIV messaging to encourage parents to have their children tested. In addition, health workers will visit families to talk about preventing mother-to-child transmission.

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