Is It Really Possible to End HIV? An Australian State Nears That Goal

New South Wales, the Australian state whose capital is Sydney, nears the target of eliminating HIV—and it might do so by 2025.

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For many cities and countries across the world, the goal of ending HIV by 2030 has been an aspirational yet unrealistic target. But the Australian state New South Wales (NSW) is close to accomplishing exactly that—and doing it by 2025, reports The Sydney Morning Herald.

Data show a total of only 178 new HIV cases in 2021 in NSW, which marks the lowest number on record and a 36% decrease over the previous five years.

“What we are seeing in NSW is unique on a global scale,” professor Andrew Grulich, head of the HIV Epidemiology and Prevention Program at the UNSW Kirby Institute, told the newspaper. “The world is watching what NSW is doing. The decline is definitely real, but it has been accelerated by COVID-19 restrictions.”

Although HIV testing declined during COVID-19, notably in 2020, it rose again last year. Similarly, as lockdowns ended, more people in the state also started PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, pills or injections that prevent HIV.

The biggest declines of new HIV diagnoses have been among Australian-born gay men and those living in cities. In order to eliminate HIV in the state, Grulich said, more focus will be aimed toward “driving infections down in young men born overseas and people living in outer Sydney suburban and regional NSW.”

“HIV is fast becoming a heterosexually acquired infection,” HIV advocate Ruan Uys told the paper. “It’s important for hetero and bi people to get tested. Migrants, the international student community—those communities really need to know we have the support here for them.”

Eliminating the HIV epidemic does not necessarily mean reaching zero HIV diagnoses. Many cities, countries and municipalities offer their own definitions for ending the epidemic.

In the United States, for example, the federal initiative “Ending the HIV Epidemic: A Plan for America” aims to lower new HIV rates by 75% by 2025 and by 90% by 2030. This would amount to

fewer than 3,000 HIV cases a year. “Reducing new infections to this level,” according to the initiative, “would essentially mean that HIV transmissions would be rare and meet the definition of ending the epidemic.”

To learn more about the U.S. initiative, read an overview at HIV.gov and visit the official web page at HRSA.org. For a related POZ article, see “Plans to End the HIV Epidemic at Home and Abroad.”

Similarly, the National HIV/AIDS Strategy, recently updated for 2022–2025, also aims to reduce new HIV infections by 75% by 2025 and by 90% by 2030 but lays out different objectives and strategies for reaching those targets. To learn more, see “What’s New in the Updated National HIV/AIDS Strategy?”

On a global scale, numerous cities across the world are participating in an international HIV initiative called Fast-Track Cities in which municipalities aim to reach 90-90-90 targets (90% of people living with HIV know their status; 90% of people who know their positive status are on HIV treatment; and 90% of people taking meds attain an undetectable viral load).

Recently, the targets were updated to aim for zero new diagnoses and zero AIDS-related deaths. To learn more and see a list of cities and their related data, visit Fast-TrackCities.org. In related news, see “Podcast Series Tells Unique Stories of ‘Fast-Track Cities’ Fighting HIV,” “NYC Is the First U.S. Fast-Track City to Meet the 90-90-90 HIV Goals” and “How Did 12 U.S. Cities Do in Reaching their 90-90-90 HIV Goals?”

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