

# HIV jump as risks ignored

By GLENN MITCHELL

VICTORIA is facing an AIDS crisis following a huge jump in the number of new HIV infections.

The 41 per cent increase has stunned Victorian medical authorities.

"We thought we had it under control but it appears we dropped the ball," VicHealth chief executive officer Dr Rob Moodie said yesterday.

He described the situation, which included a 67 per cent HIV increase among gay men, as an "emergency crisis".

"It clearly is something we would ignore at our own peril," he said. "This is an emerging crises which we have to deal with rapidly and effectively.

"It's like the ongoing road toll, you have to keep on getting the message through even though the death toll is dropping."

The figures show a 57 per cent jump in HIV-positive women but a major downturn among intravenous drug users.

Authorities are particularly alarmed at young people ignoring safe sex messages.

A recent survey found some 70 per cent of Victorian teens no longer practiced safe sex.

"That message is not getting through the way it used to. It may be a case of safe sex fatigue," Dr Moodie said.

A Victorian Government ministerial taskforce headed by Dr Moodie has made

containment of the ADIS crisis its priority.

The taskforce learnt late last year there had been a 41 per cent increase in new HIV notifications in Victoria in the first six months of 2000.

It is working on Victoria's first AIDS strategy.

It is believed the rise has been partly caused by HIV sufferers believing they may not pass on the disease because of the quality of their medical treatment.

"AIDS is now perceived not as a fatal disease by many but as a chronic manageable disease like other sexually transmitted diseases where treatments are available," Dr Moodie said.

"This is in effect 'new AIDS' where people believe that because their viral load is

almost undetectable and they are receiving treatment they can't infect people but they can."

It is also believed that AIDS and safe sex education over the past five years have failed.

The Victorian Government's new AIDS and safe sex education strategy will be aimed at doctors to ensure their HIV-patients know they can always pass on the virus.

It will also focus on gay venues by asking them to develop a code-of-conduct for on-premises sex.

Dr Moodie said the taskforce was also examining a major education program for general practitioners to make some experts in HIV.

The Victorian AIDS Council yesterday labelled the rise in new cases a "statistical blip".

"A similar thing happened in 1995 and then the numbers went back to normal," council president Dr Darren Russell said yesterday.

Dr Moodie said: "This cannot be written off as a statistical blip, although I hope it is.

"In the past five years there has been a major lag in education on HIV and people have stopped practicing safe sex."

Senior epidemiology lecturer Andrew Grulich said the jump was "extremely worrying".

"It is a substantial increase and one that has to say to us that new strategies are needed to curb the number of new infections," he said.