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3 get AIDS virus after skin contact

By Robert Pear, The New York Times

WASHINGTON: Evidence has emerged for the first time that the AIDS virus can be passed on by brief skin contact with infected blood.

Three health care workers have become infected with the virus after their skin was briefly exposed to blood from AIDS patients, a report due to be published tomorrow will reveal.

United States federal health officials said this was the first documented spread of the AIDS virus to health workers without direct injection of infected blood into the body or prolonged exposure to body fluids.

But they added that there was still no evidence that the virus passes directly through intact skin. Each of the three women had small abnormalities in the skin through which the virus might have passed.

None of the three had had any other experiences that put them at risk of AIDS — and none have so far developed the disease.

Two of them were not wearing gloves, in contravention of government guidelines for dealing with AIDS patients. The third was wearing gloves but was splattered with blood when a stopper popped off a vial.

The cases will be described in a report by the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, an internationally recognised authority on AIDS.

Dr James Hughes, director of the CDC's Hospital Infections Programme, said the new cases underlined the need for strict adherence to guidelines for preventing health care workers from becoming infected with AIDS.

These say that workers should wear gloves when they expect to be exposed to blood. In some cases involving "more extensive contact with blood or potentially infective body fluids," they say, gowns, masks, goggles or safety glasses may be required.

In one of the three cases, Dr



CASE 1: Hospital workers were trying to resuscitate a patient who was not breathing. A health worker applied pressure to gauze on the patient's arm for 20 minutes. Her hands were chapped and she was not wearing gloves.

CASE 2: Blood splattered the face of a health-care worker when a rubber stopper popped off a glass tube being filled with a syringe. The employee had a history of acne but apparently no open lesions. Officials suspect the virus entered through mucous membranes in the mouth or an inflamed area of her face.

CASE 3: Blood spilled onto the hands and forearms of a health care worker operating a machine to separate blood components. She was not wearing gloves. Skin on one of her ears had been inflamed and she may have touched that area before washing the blood off her hands.

• Two of the workers later became ill with what seemed to be a viral infection, but recovered.

Hughes said, a hospital worker was exposed to blood while she was pressing gauze against the arm of a patient who was bleeding.

In the second, a rubber stopper popped off a glass tube, splattering the worker with blood. Some of it hit her mouth, where the virus may

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have entered through mucous membrane.

In the third, blood spilled onto the hands and forearms of a worker manipulating a machine used to separate blood into its components.

Officials at the CDC, an arm of the US Public Health Service, summoned 15 to 20 representatives of major medical organisations to Atlanta to discuss the new cases last week.

Several people who attended the meeting on May 13 said they had been instructed by federal officials not to discuss it.

After learning of the new cases on Tuesday, Kenneth Raske, President of the Greater New York Hospital Association, said in an interview, "There is no need for hospital workers to be alarmed.

"The latest report demonstrates the need to continue infection control procedures that we put in place about two years ago," said Mr Raske, whose organisation represents 70 hospitals and 16 nursing homes.

And in an interview on Tuesday, Dr Hughes said there was still no evidence that the AIDS virus could be transmitted through casual contact. Even when the skin is exposed to infected blood, he said, the chances of infection are very low.

In the three new cases, he said, federal officials had been unable to determine "the exact mechanism of transmission" of the AIDS virus.

Four of the six previously reported cases involved health care workers who were infected with the AIDS virus after being accidentally jabbed with needles. Another case involved a woman who was providing care to her son at home and in a hospital nursery; the child had been infected with the AIDS virus as a result of a blood transfusion. The sixth case involved a woman who was providing home care for a patient to whom she was not related.

Doctors say that health-care workers frequently ignore the recommended safety precautions, in the belief that casual contact cannot pass on the disease.