

# 6,000 gays carry HIV, says expert

By KATHY GRIFFIN

AN expert says a rapid spread among homosexuals of the virus which causes AIDS means there could be up to 6,000 carriers among Hongkong's gay men.

Dr Patrick Li Chung-ki said his figure was based on an estimated gay male population of 200,000, or 10 per cent of males, and an infection rate of three per cent among the 447 homosexuals who had attended the Government's AIDS Counselling and Health Education Service, which he heads.

"We must accept this is a very small study, but if the sample is representative and you make some projections, around 6,000 would be infected," he said.

Dr Li said the three per cent rate among homosexuals would not be high compared with other countries.

The AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) counselling service provides anonymous testing, so it is assumed clients are honest about their sexual preferences.

Tests are also conducted at social hygiene clinics and by the Red Cross and other sources, but only 106 homosexuals from all sources have tested HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) positive. Thirty-two of them developed AIDS.

Dr Li said it was thought many homosexuals were still reluctant to come forward for testing, even though homosexuality was decriminalised in July. Typically, his centre tests about 10 homosexuals a month.

"There might be a number of reasons why they haven't come forward. In the past it was blamed on the law on homosexuality but the fear of prosecution is not the only reason," he said.

Some might be reluctant

because there was no cure, although early treatment could improve their prospects.

Others might fear the psychological impact or discrimination from their family, friends or employers. Counselling and support services were available to help them cope.

Dr Li said decriminalisation was not without benefit because it meant homosexual groups could form more openly.

His service would work with one, called the Ten Per Cent Club, to spread more information about AIDS.

Among the 447 homosexuals attending Dr Li's service, the rate of HIV infection has almost doubled since 1989, with 4.1 per cent now infected. Between 1985 and 1989 only 2.3 per cent were found to carry the virus.

Dr Li said homosexuals generally faced a greater risk of infection and the rate was growing fastest among Chinese homosexuals, who represent 383 of those tested at Dr Li's centre. From 1985 to 1989 their infection rate was 1.9 per cent, but since 1989 it had increased to 3.3 per cent.

Dr Li said the number of tests did not include repeat cases.

He also stressed the results should not reduce the importance of HIV testing among heterosexuals, where the rate of infection was also growing rapidly.

Last month, Dr Li revealed that the number of heterosexual men testing HIV positive at social hygiene clinics had risen eight-fold in three years.

Overall, 139 heterosexuals had tested HIV positive, including nine women, and 24 have gone on to develop AIDS. At Dr Li's clinic, 3,458 heterosexuals have been tested since 1985 and only three, or 0.09 per cent,

were infected. However, all three cases were found this year.

A member of the voluntary AIDS Foundation set up in June to raise public awareness, Mrs Peggy Lam Pci Yu-dja, agreed the estimated rate among homosexuals was alarming, but said it should not overshadow the threat to the heterosexual community.

"I understand that the number of HIV-infected people will increase 10-fold over the next few years and those people will not necessarily be from the homosexual community," said Mrs Lam, who has just been re-appointed to the Legislative Council.

"Of course homosexuals are one of our target groups, but I don't think we should focus only on them. Others are at risk and generally speaking, I think we should educate the general public," she said.

Concern over heterosexual infection increased last month when it was revealed a second prostitute in the territory had tested HIV positive.

Dr Li said yesterday five more people had been identified as HIV carriers and two more had developed full-blown AIDS, bringing the respective totals to 189 and 56. All are adult males.

Four of the new HIV carriers are homosexual. One of the AIDS victims is a homosexual but the second case is still to be determined.

There were no deaths last month from AIDS, although so far 38 AIDS patients have died. Twelve are currently receiving counselling and treatment in Hongkong and six others have left the territory.

• Information about AIDS can be obtained from the AIDS Concern helpline every Thursday and Saturday from 7 pm to 10 pm, on 525-3433.