

Concurrent sexual partnerships and the HIV epidemic in Africa

The notion that concurrent sexual partnerships (having more than one partner at the same time) are especially common in sub-Saharan Africa and explain the region's high HIV prevalence is accepted by many as conventional wisdom. A systematic review that was recently published was conducted to question this theory. The quantitative and qualitative evidence offered by the principal proponents of the concurrency hypothesis was evaluated and the mathematical model they use to establish the plausibility of the hypothesis analysed. They find that research supporting the concurrency hypothesis “either finds no correlation or has important limitations.” In addition, they charge that the mathematical models used “require unrealistic assumptions about frequency of sexual contact, gender symmetry, levels of concurrency, and per-act transmission rates.” Quantitative evidence cited to support the concurrency theory is unconvincing, the authors charge, because it excludes demographic and health surveys and other data that find *low* concurrency in Africa. Proponents of concurrency “make broad statements about non-African

concurrency based on very few surveys, report data incorrectly, report data from studies that have no information about concurrency as though they supported the hypothesis, report incomparable data and cite unpublished or unavailable studies.” The researchers maintain that supportive qualitative data is often “irrelevant” because they do not compare Africa with other regions. They conclude by saying that promoters of the concurrency hypothesis have failed to establish that concurrency is unusually prevalent in Africa or that the kinds of concurrent partnerships found in Africa produce more rapid spread of HIV than other forms of sexual behaviour. The authors urge policy makers to “turn attention to drivers of African HIV epidemics that are policy sensitive and for which there is substantial epidemiological evidence.”

Reference: Sawers L, Stillwaggon E. Concurrent sexual partnerships do not explain the HIV epidemics in Africa: a systematic review of the evidence. *J Int AIDS Soc.* 2010;13:34