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Australia announces victory over AIDS

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Singapore: Ahead of the 21st International AIDS Conference, a team of Australian researchers and experts from the Australian Federation of Aids Organisations have made an announcement stating that the country is free of AIDS and could virtually eliminate HIV infections by 2020. The team claimed that there were fewer new cases in the past two decades and increased public awareness, diagnosis and antiretroviral treatments which have drastically changed the lifespan trajectory of those with the virus.

"The AIDS public health threat has morphed into an HIV prevention challenge," Professor Andrew Grulich, head of the HIV Epidemiology and Prevention Program at the Kirby Institute of the University of New South Wales, told the Sydney Morning Herald. He added that the decision to drop the term epidemic reflects case numbers and medical advances to treat the infected, while noting that continued public awareness remains crucial to prevent new cases.

"There's no magic number or threshold for measuring this," Professor Grulich stated."We just don't see much AIDS in Australia anymore. We have seen less visibility among gay men for a very long time." Although 1000 Australians are diagnosed with HIV every year, effective and accessible therapies mean that few people progress to AIDS, according to the announcement from Grulich and his colleagues at five organizations.

However, many researchers warn that too many people are still becoming infected with HIV and a diagnosis often comes quite late, after the virus has started causing illness. Australia's Public Benefits Scheme covers reimbursement for antiretroviral drugs, and has extended coverage to hepatitis C therapies in the past year, making it possible to receive sustained treatment.

Experts further argued that HIV epidemic is "not over" yet and highlighted that over the past years detection of HIV cases have been increased by 13 percent. Professor Grulich warned that AIDS remains a public health threat and that diagnoses for the virus have incresed in the past decade partly because of a rise in unsafe sex. "People still die of AIDS. It can't be ignored at a societal or individual level," Professor Grulich told the newspaper.

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"The main challenge in Australia is stopping new HIV infections and making sure everyone knows their HIV status and if they have it, gets treatment, because proper treatment reduces their chance of transmitting the virus by 95%," the director of the Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity, Professor Sharon Lewin, said.

The goal of ending new HIV infections by 2020, signed up to by every Australian state and territory minister, will become unrealistic unless something is done to stop the virus from being spread, experts like Mr Lewin opined.