

Dr. Pönnighaus Replies

TO THE EDITOR:

The comments by Dr. Gormus are most welcome. However, I would like to emphasize that we did not observe any evidence of an association between incident leprosy and HIV infection in northern Malawi (6). In the whole of Malawi detection rates continue to decline as shown in The Table while disability and lepromatous ratios are stable, although HIV infection rates are known to be on the increase. This observation also argues against the likelihood of "an increase in leprosy cases worldwide secondary to the AIDS epidemic."

The authors' conclusion in a recent study from Tanzania indeed suggests that the HIV

epidemic may lead to an increase in the number of multibacillary cases (2). However, this conclusion hinges on a single (!) slit-skin smear-negative, "multibacillary," HIV-seropositive leprosy patient and should, at this stage, not be given more credence than it is worth.

We did suggest that there might be an association between HIV infection and relapses (6). Indeed, it would be surprising if the clinical course of leprosy would never be changed by co-infection with the HIV (3). However, given that relapse rates after multidrug therapy seem to be extremely low (4,5), even a moderate increase due to HIV infection would not change the nearly

THE TABLE. Detection rates of new Malawian leprosy patients, 1984–1993.

	Year									
	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
No. patients detected during the year	1197	1135	1029	1093	907	810	781	638	693	618
Detection rate/10,000	1.7	1.6	1.4	1.4	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.70	0.73	0.63
Annual reduction/increase in detection rate (%)	-14	-8.5	-12	+2.4	-20	-14	-7.0	-21	+4.7	-14
Percentage of patients with a disability > 1 (WHO grading 1960)	12.9	12.5	11.1	9.8	11.7	7.9	11.3	11.9	10.2	13.2
Percentage of patients with multibacillary leprosy	17.4	21.1	20.7	17.7	19.7	14.8	18.3	21.2	21.5	20.7

worldwide pattern of declining leprosy detection rates (⁴).

The relevance of the Gormus, *et al.* and Baskin, *et al.* findings (based on three out of five rhesus monkeys) thus still awaits confirmation. But time will tell.

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