**Healthy babies cast doubt on Aids testing in Africa**

**From PAUL REDFERN,** Nation,

**Correspondent,** ·London

An investigation by *the Sunday*

*Times* newspaper which started

in a Nairobi hospice for HIV children

has again .cast doubt on HIV

testing in :Africa as well as the links HIV has with Aids

The investigation by the newspapers

correspondent Neville

Hodgkinson begun at the

Nyumbani hospice for abandoned

and orphaned HIV positive

children.

Despite predictions that most

of these children would have died

within a year, all but one are alive

and well. Some, who were originally

diagnosed as HIV positive

are now HIV negative. Others despite

remaining HIV positive

· have put on weight and appear

healthy.

· Father Angelo. d'Agostino, a

former surgeon who trained as

a Jesuit priest and became professor

of psychiatry in Washington

before coining to Africa 10 years

ago is the founder of the hospice.

According. to the *Sunday*

*Times,* Father d'Agostino, "in

common with' growing numbers

of scientists and doctors around

the world, is beginning to question

whether HIV really is· the

killer it has been made out to be.

"He like them suspects that

many 'Aids" cases are really old

diseases given a new name and

that people who test HIV-positive

are not, as most have been

led to believe, the victims of a

new inevitably lethal disease.

"I'm a physician and I bought

the theory that HIV is. the cause

of Aids," .he told the *Sunday*

*Times.* "But it is surprising. We

expected a lot more deaths and a

lot more serious illness .

"According to most predictions,

the children should have

died within two to three months

of coming to us. Instead, we have

now had to set up a nursery

school and I'm planning to negotiate

their entry into primary

school.

"I had been preparing to establish group therapy for the mothers

to deal with their grief at the

loss of the children. Instead, the'

only losses..the hospice has are

happy ones: some of the children

become HIV -negative and are

taken back by relatives or ordinary children's homes." .

This is not the first time the

*Sunday Times* newspapers had

cast doubt on HIV testing in

Africa and indeed the links with

Aids. But its - views alongside

· those of a minority of the medical

profession are still regarded as

heresy by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

WHO maintains that thousands

of children die annually because

of Aids and that eight million

people across Africa .are

infected and that 500,000 a year will be dying by the year 2000.

But most children who are diagnosed

as HIV positive are automatically abandoned by their relatives

and health officials as

having no hope, the *Sunday*

*Times* says. As a result the children

are killed "by multiple infections,.

malnutrition and misery

rather than by Aids."

Some explain that some HIV,

positive babies later test negative

because they were never truly virus-

infected but instead inherited their

mothers antibodies· to HIV

which fade with time;

But mothers too are being misdiagnosed

and doubts are growing

as to the efficiency of the HIV

tests--across Africa..

Other critics doubt the accuracy

of the statistics which are being

correlated on Aids and HIV

infection because of the difficulty

of getting hold of such

information.

The *Sunday Times* points out

that extensive medical investigation

into Aids in Africa during

the early to mid 1990s led to initial

claims that there were 5 million

HIV-infected people on the

continent.

"Lurid predictions followed,

Such as one newspaper claim that within 10 years., Aids would leave

vast areas of now-populated land

devoid of a single living person.

"The tests that led to those estimates

are now admitted to have

been unreliable, producing a high

proportion of false positive results.

Newer tests are said to be

more accurate but according to a

recent review in the journal, *Bio*

*Technology,* none has yet been

scientifically validated.

"The article showed that multiple,

non-specific assaults on the

immune system, which are extremely

common in Africa as a

result of poverty, prostitution

and the breakdown of medical

and· social services, may be causing

millions to test positive when

they are not infected with HIV."

In an interview with Dr Hedvig

Pelle, the WHO co-ordinator for

the Kenya National Aids Control

Programme, she said that Aids

was "widespread and increasing.

My colleagues. in other countries

can tell you the same.

"However if you come with

this postulate that there are a lot

. of false HIV-positive, it is very

difficult to tell."

The *Sunday Times* concludes

by saying that "political factors appears to play a part in determining whether a (country has a

major Aids Problem or not.

Kenya lost an estimated £200

million in desperately needed

foreign currency in November

1991 when the industrialised

world decided' to try to force political· and economic reform on

the country by cutting aid.

"A recent crisis .announcement

on Aids by the country's 'health

minister is seen within the international aid community as an attempt

to win back donor funds."

And what is the secret of the

success at the Nyumbani hospice?

That, according to Sister

Mary Owens, is. entirely down to

the TLC(Tender Loving Care)

factor. "Their whole experience

in the home is one that makes

them happy children." .

And as for the future? Father

d'Agostino had few doubts: "Will

they (the children be alive) next

year? I have no reason to doubt

it; they are healthy.

"They. are very sick when they

come to us. But as a result of the

care here, they put on weight, recover

from their infections and

thrive. Hygiene is excellent. Nutrition

is very good. They are

really flourishing

Father d'Agostino and some of the Nyumbani children join other guests in admiring a tankard presented to

the priest after he won the Guinness Stout Effort Award recently for his work at the home. Most of the HIV positive

children - after getting Tender Loving Care - test negative