**Aids: Wonder drug failure 50 per cent**

By DANIEL Q. HANEY.

TORONTO. Wednesday

Widely heralded new Aids treatments

that seemed to stop the virus cold and

revive patients from near death are

now beginning to fail in about half of

all those treated, doctors said on Monday.

The disappointing reports suggest

that the tough virus is coming back after

being knocked briefly into submission,

just as many experts feared it

would.

"Over the past year, we had a honeymoon

period," said Dr. Steven

Deeks. "The epidemic will likely split

in two, and for half the people, we will

need new therapeutic options. "

Deeks presented data from the University of California at San Francisco's

large public Aids clinic at San Francisco

General Hospital.

Prescriptions of so-called three-drug

cocktails - two older Aids drugs plus

one of the new class of medicines

called protease inhibitors have

clearly revolutionized Aids care. In

many places, more than 90 per cent of

Aids patients are taking these combinations,

and typically people start on

them as soon as they learn they are infected,

even before they get sick.

Patients whose disease-fighting T

cells were ravaged by HIV have gotten

out of bed, regained normal lives and

even gone back to work. However,

many worried from the start that the virus

would eventually grow resistant to the protease inhibitors and resume its

insidious destruction.

The latest data, presented on Monday

at an infectious disease conference

sponsored by the American Society of

Microbiology, suggests this is indeed

happening regularly.

Deeks and colleagues reviewed the

records of 136 HIV-infected people

who started on protease inhibitors in

March 1996, when Crixivan and Norvir,

the first two powerful protease inhibitors,

came on the market.

Most patients responded dramatically.

Their virus levels dropped so low

they could not be found on standard

tests. But since then, the virus has returned

to detectable levels in 53 per cent Although this is ominous, no one

knows exactly what it means.

"All of our failures are clinically

feeling very well," said Deeks. 'It's

.very important to understand we have

no idea of the prognosis of people who

have resistant virus. "

Deeks said other large Aids clinics

are having similar experiences, although

his is the first to present the

data publicly.

"There is a whole mixture of explanations"

for the failures, said Dr. David

Ho of the Aaron Diamond Aids Research

Center in New York City.

"Compliance is absolutely critical,

" Deeks said. "When we say compliance,

we mean rigid adherence to over

20 pills a day." (AP)