**REUTERS**

**Fear, social change drive down Zimbabwe HIV rates**

By Kate Kelland

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LONDON (Reuters) - Fear of infection and mass social change have driven a huge decline in HIV rates in Zimbabwe, offering important lessons on how to fight the AIDS epidemic in the rest of Africa, scientists said on Tuesday.

In a study in the journal PLoS Medicine, British researchers said Zimbabwe's epidemic was one of the biggest in the world until the rate of people infected with HIV almost halved, from 29 percent of the population in 1997 to 16 percent in 2007.

Their findings show that Zimbabweans have primarily been motivated to change their sexual behavior because of increased awareness about AIDS deaths which heightened their fears of catching the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes it.

"The HIV epidemic is still very large, with more than one in 10 adults infected today," said Timothy Hallett of Imperial College, London, who worked on the study.

"We hope that Zimbabwe and other countries in southern Africa can learn from these lessons and strengthen programs to drive infections down even further."

Latest data from the United Nations show that an estimated 33.3 million people worldwide are infected with HIV and the majority of those live in sub-Saharan Africa.

The virus can be controlled with cocktails of drugs, but there is no cure and nearly 30 million people have died of HIV-related causes since the disease first emerged in the 1980s.

Simon Gregson, also from Imperial College, and a senior investigator on the study, said that given continuing high HIV/AIDS infection rates in many sub-Saharan African countries, it was important to understand why the disease had taken a such a dramatic downturn in Zimbabwe.

"Very few other countries around the world have seen reductions in HIV infection, and of all African nations, Zimbabwe was thought least likely to see such a turnaround," he said.

AIDS experts say that while there have been dramatic gains in the availability AIDS drugs in poor countries in recent years, the fight against the disease -- which is most often transmitted via sex -- will never be won unless prevention efforts can be made more effective.

The United Nations AIDS program said last year that young people in Africa were starting to lead a "revolution" in HIV prevention and driving down rates of the disease by having safer sex and fewer sexual partners.

The Imperial College researchers found that in Zimbabwe, a change in attitudes toward numbers of sexual partners was helped by HIV/AIDS prevention programs, which were reinforced through mass media, church leaders and employers.

The poor economic situation in Zimbabwe from the early 2000s would also have driven down the number of concurrent partners a man could have, due to constraints on his wallet, they said.

The study is available at: [here](http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info)%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1000414

(Editing by Angus MacSwan)