

AIDS activists fear apathy Participation down at AIDS walks; organizers blame desensitization

By Kelly Ebbels
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(McGill University)

MONTREAL (CUP) -- While thousands of Canadians took to the streets last month for the Walk for Life, a nationwide event that raises funds for the fight against HIV and AIDS, their numbers were much lower than years past.

Participation in Montreal's annual AIDS walk was down to 15,000 people, compared to 25,000 in 1999. In Vancouver, registration was down by 25 per cent.

Mark Wainberg, director of the McGill AIDS Centre, said he believes the decline in numbers is a result of a widespread

desensitization that corresponds with a decrease in disease mortality rates.

"People think that we've cured AIDS and we haven't," Wainberg said. "In some ways, we're all victims of the success we've had with the drugs. Just because they have lengthened lifespan doesn't mean we don't have to be vigilant in our fight."

Wainberg said while AIDS deaths may be down, the number of AIDS cases is on the rise, especially among heterosexual young women.

Still, AIDS walk organizers remain optimistic the fight will continue to gain support.

Darren Fisher, national events coordinator for the Canadian AIDS Society, said the decreased numbers of walkers

in the larger cities are not a good measure of the overall success of the event, which actually brought out increased participation and funds in smaller communities.

"For a lot of cities, this is the only fundraiser or outreach opportunity," said Fisher.

Until this year, AIDS walks across the country were organized separately in each city. This year marked the first collaborative event, in which regional organizers banded together in hopes of generating more awareness and sponsorship.

Louis-Michel Taillefer, spokesperson for the Farha Foundation, an AIDS fundraising group in Montreal, suggested the decrease in urban participation at the events is the result of increased competition between different charity walks scheduled for the same time of year, such as the Terry Fox Run and Run for the Cure, which benefit cancer research.

"It is always difficult for us to recruit people. People are torn between all these different causes," said Taillefer.

This year's Terry Fox Run in Quebec garnered a 30 per cent increase in participation

and 18 per cent increase in funds. The run was held at 60 locations across Quebec and at thousands of sites nationally and internationally.

Taillefer also attributed the decline in AIDS walk participation to the taboo nature of the disease.

"Because it's a transmissible disease, unlike cancer, there seems to be this general attitude of, 'If you've got it, then you deserve it. You did something wrong,'" he said. "That makes it much more difficult for us to attract people."

Danny Wright, Queer McGill librarian, said he worries the rising desensitization to the disease could hinder the vast amount of research that still needs to be done to find a cure. "There's kind of a complacency about it now. There's less of an effort to support it. People feel it's dwindling down when it's just as present," he said.

Queer McGill sent 10 people to the walk, and has so far raised \$400 to be donated to AIDS Community Care Montreal.

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Men's Volleyball

Last weekend, the UPEI men's volleyball travelled to Fredericton to partake in a double-header against STU. The boys played well in this, their first two matches of the year, finishing with a 1-1 record. This weekend the boys play in another double-header, this time against UNBSJ, at the Chi-Wan Young Sports Centre in what could possibly be the only home matches of the season for this travelling team. Come out and catch some of the best volleyball action in the region.