



1 Since the 1980s, infectious disease has re-emerged at the top of the global health agenda, destroying the optimism following World War 2 that modern medical interventions, such as antibiotic therapy and mass vaccination programmes, could eliminate deaths from infection. The new awareness of infection as a major threat to health has centred on the AIDS pandemic.

2 Acquired immune deficiency syndrome had already claimed over 21 million lives by the start of 2001, including 4.5 million children. By that date new infections with HIV (the human immunodeficiency virus) in Sub-Saharan Africa had accelerated past 16,000 per day; in some regions over 25% of the adult population were already infected and average life expectancy at birth had fallen by more than 10 years.

3 AIDS was not the only apparently 'new' infection to threaten human health. Later in this chapter we review some other 'emerging' infectious diseases in the twenty-first century, which have risen in importance against the general downward trend globally in infection as a cause of death.

4 The impact of HIV/AIDS on the economies and hence the political stability of heavily affected countries is a major cause for international concern, and reminds us that an infectious disease still has the potential to alter the course of a nation's history. Past epidemics and the long-term impact of diseases have been among the most potent forces shaping the current global distribution of population and cultures. Their influence can be seen in the balance of political and economic power in the modern world.

(The Open University (2008) S320 *Infectious Diseases*, Science Archive, p. 7)