

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXXII, Number 53, 15 April 2008 — ACCORDING TO A NEW STUDY [ARTICLE]

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HIV patients who take short-term breaks from treatments can suffer drastic health consequences shortly after, researchers at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University Medical Center have found in a new study.

The study, called Strategies for Management of Anti-Retroviral Therapy, or SMART, was the largest study ever attempted on HIV treatment and involved over 5,000 patients from 33

countries. It found that individuals who interrupted their HIV medication regimens had a mortality rate as much as 80 percent higher for as long as 18 months afterward when compared to people who took their drugs consistently. Such patients also had an increased risk of heart, kidney, and liver diseases.

“While restarting continuous therapy lowered the risk of infections and death, the increased risk from intermittent treatment was not completely eliminated,” said Wafaa El-Sadr, professor of medicine and epidemiology at CUMC, in a press release. “The message is clear for

the foreseeable future—patients with HIV around the world who start therapy should remain on it. We are not sure why there is this lasting effect and need to continue with our research to fully understand this finding.”

About 33 million people worldwide have HIV, the virus which leads to AIDS, which has killed over 25 million people since 1981. The study was undertaken because AIDS medications can be expensive and possibly cause side effects, so researchers wanted to observe how patient health would be affected by interrupting drug use.

—*Sandeep Soman*