

2002 Winter Dinner Meeting Review

by Melanie Marty

We were pleased to have Dr. Daniel Robbins provide us with an overview of the JF Kapnek Charitable Trust-sponsored work in Zimbabwe on decreasing maternal-infant transfer of HIV. Dr. Robbins, a local Bay Area pediatrician, has been working with colleagues in Zimbabwe, and especially at the Epworth Clinic to educate the populace about transmission of AIDS and work with pregnant mothers to reduce transmission of the virus to their babies. Eighty-three percent of pediatric AIDS cases are in sub-Saharan Africa. In Epworth, a suburb of the Capitol of Zimbabwe, about 30% of the women are seropositive for HIV. In addition, about 1/3 of the infants become infected at birth or perinatally via breast milk with the virus. About 60,000 infants and young children per year die in this area of AIDS or AIDS-related disease. Thus, this is a hot spot for AIDS within Africa. Transmission can be prevented by treatment of the mother during labor and delivery along with one dose to the infant of AZT and related drugs. In addition, early introduction of solid foods results in higher transmission through the breast milk by irritating and compromising the gut wall. Education to wait longer before introducing solid foods, and using less-irritating cereals, has resulted in decreased transmission of the virus through breast milk. The group is working with women to provide longer-term care of the mothers thus decreasing the number of orphans due to AIDS. Dr. Robbins provided an interesting discussion of the difficult social, cultural, and political environment in which he and his colleagues work. This was a fascinating if somewhat scary look at a huge problem, and provided hope that something can be accomplished even in the face of such adversity.