

This alarm isn't false: AIDS can threaten all

By Jon Van
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HEALTH OFFICIALS and scientists, in the last few weeks, have issued new alarms about the AIDS epidemic, which is emerging as the most devastating health threat to face the United States this century.

Quick action is needed to keep AIDS, acquired immune deficiency syndrome, from taking hold in the general population, experts say. Several recent reports and conferences have underlined a growing consensus that the epidemic, though still largely confined to homosexuals and intravenous drug users, will pose an increasing threat to heterosexuals.

Ironically, the most alarming statistics cited in the latest reports were announced last June by the Public Health Service at an AIDS planning session: the five-year projection that a total of 270,000 AIDS cases will have occurred in the United States by 1991, with 179,000 deaths.

Some 74,000 new AIDS cases and 54,000 deaths are projected to occur in 1991 alone—and about 10 percent of those are expected to involve victims who acquire the infection from heterosexual intercourse.

Though they are more than four months old, these statistics proved to be major attention-getters in several AIDS-related studies issued recently. Among them:

● Dr. C. Everett Koop, surgeon general, issued a report intended for the general public in which he spells out how the virus can and cannot be

spread. While endorsing chastity as the ideal protection against the disease, Koop's report also includes practical advice in plain language for those who choose to be sexually active, including the use of condoms during anal or vaginal intercourse.

● A National Academy of Sciences report, entitled *Confronting AIDS*, called for an all-out educational effort to change sexual behavior in this country to avoid spread of the AIDS virus. Frank advice is "a life and death matter" in educating the young and minorities in how the disease is spread and how they can avoid it, the authors said.

● Dr. Lonnie Edwards, Chicago health commissioner, said his office estimates that 30,000 to 50,000 city residents carry the AIDS virus and are capable of passing it to others through sexual activity. His office projects that the city will have seen 13,000 AIDS cases within five years.

All this anticipates that the number of AIDS cases will continue its meteoric expansion. Roughly, the number of AIDS cases has been more than doubling every year since the disease was discovered in 1979.

Nearly 27,000 AIDS cases have been reported in the United States, and more than 15,000 of those have died. Amid this welter of statistics, there are questions about how reliable the country's AIDS numbers are.

The National Academy of Sciences study raised some questions, noting that some AIDS cases and even deaths go unreported because local doctors or

Cont'd on next page

AIDS

from previous page

health authorities wish to spare the victims' relatives additional pain.

Studies in Illinois and nationally suggest that the amount of under-reporting of AIDS might be as much as 10 percent, according to Dr. Renslow Sherer of the Illinois AIDS Council. Other statistics associated with the illness may be even less reliable.

There is no national effort to keep track of illnesses caused by the AIDS virus that aren't severe enough to be classed as AIDS. There is a need to begin monitoring the level of so-called ARC [AIDS-related complex] illnesses, the academy's study suggested.

People who may carry the virus without symptoms of illness are by far the biggest group associated with the AIDS virus. Estimates are that this group could be as large as 2 million or as small as 500,000 in the United States.

Estimates as to how many of these people will go on to get AIDS range from 25 percent to 50 percent, and some experts believe

that the rate may become even higher with the passage of time—if incubation periods prove to be longer than is assumed.

Estimates of the overall infection rate begin with such difficult tasks as trying to determine how many people fall into high risk categories for AIDS, including homosexual men or users of illicit drugs who share needles. Estimates of these numbers are then compared with known percentages of AIDS virus infection in some urban areas to project a national figure.

Though the estimates may be subject to many faults, they must be accepted at present as the basis for planning to cope with the AIDS epidemic, but new studies aimed at obtaining more accurate statistics must be undertaken, the academy's report said.

It rejected as impractical, probably unethical and virtually impossible any attempt to test everyone in the country for antibodies to the AIDS virus.

Behind much of the renewed urgency in addressing the AIDS question is the fact that the virus has an incubation period of at least five years, a fact that allowed it to spread rapidly through many homosexual communities before anyone was even aware it existed.

There is concern among health officials and researchers that a similar spread through a sexually active portion of the heterosexual community could be occurring now, with the general public lulled into complacency by the widespread belief that the epidemic is inherently limited to homosexuals and drug addicts.

For that reason, the academy's report spoke about referring to "high risk activities" rather than high risk groups. The disease is already well established in Africa on an equal footing in men and women.

A year ago, 1 percent of the victims in the United States were classed as heterosexuals who were not intravenous drug users. Today 2 percent are in that category, excluding immigrants from Africa or Haiti. By 1991, it is expected that 10 percent of AIDS victims will be heterosexuals.

The science academy's study noted that blacks and Hispanics already suffer a disproportionate amount of AIDS. In the near future, the study said, heterosexuals at highest risk for AIDS will be those who consort with prostitutes or drug users.

Teens who are at an age where experimentation with sex and

drugs often occurs are seen by the academy's scientists as being in greatest need of frank and factual information about how the AIDS virus is spread and how to avoid it.

Since the disease was discovered, there has been a tendency for the federal government to foster an optimistic view among the general public. Once the virus was isolated, for example, Margaret Heckler, then secretary of Health and Human Services, held a press conference to predict that a vaccine would be developed within a few years.

Dr. Koop's report was definitely a step away from government-encouraged complacency and a move in the direction urged by the academy's report, which calls for a billion-dollar federal public health education campaign.

The events of the last few weeks apparently herald a new, more direct approach to the AIDS problem. It will likely lead to much more frank and graphic public discussions of sex, including widespread advertisements for condoms.

"People have to understand," said Sherer. "The era of being genteel about sexuality is long past. We just can't afford it anymore."