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The price of promiscuity?

By Bob Danielson

Rolling Stone called it "Sexual Cancer, America's deadliest epidemic." *The New York Times Magazine* said it is as relentless as leukemia and as contagious as hepatitis. And *Science 83* called it a killer.

The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta calls it AIDS: Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome, an epidemic which breaks down the body's immune system, leaving it open to a rash of rare and merciless diseases.

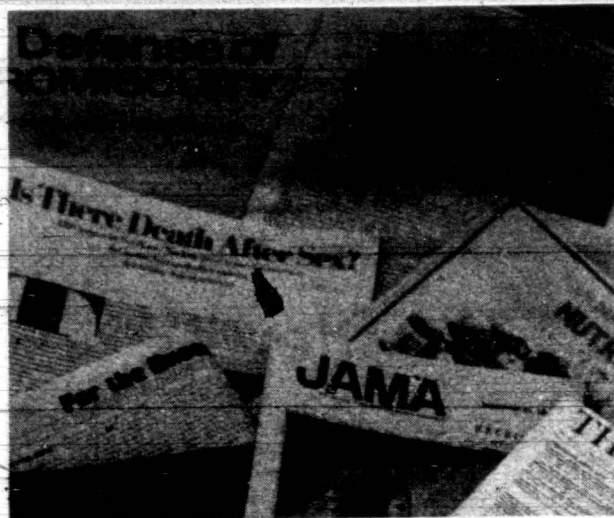
Since 1979, AIDS has attacked 958 victims, 365 are dead, said *The New York Times Magazine*. Of those diagnosed before June 1981, 75 percent have already died. Some researchers believe that no one survives it.

The Centers for Disease Control first heard of the epidemic in Spring, 1981. At that time, doctors in New York and San Francisco began seeing an unusual pattern of diseases in gay men: pneumocystis carinii pneumonia in some, and Kaposi's Sarcoma, a rare form of cancer that attacks the skin or internal organs, in others.

But in every case, there was a breakdown of the patients' immune systems. At first they felt run down, bothered by periods of prolonged fever or persistent swollen lymph glands. Some experienced unplanned weight loss. These feelings continued for six to 18 months. As they lost their ability to fight off disease, a third of the men developed Kaposi's Sarcoma, and lesions and bluish/purplish spots appeared on the skin. Some developed PCP or a string of other diseases caused by fungi or herpes and other viruses that affect people whose immune systems are not functioning properly.

As AIDS began to spread through urban gay communities, researchers for the AIDS Task Force spotted some similarities: Gay men with AIDS were more likely than healthy gay men to have anonymous sex in bars and bathhouses, engage in sexual practices that cause abrasions and expose the men to small amounts of blood and feces, and the AIDS victims more often had a history of sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis and hepatitis B.

Researchers began to explore a few theories on the causes of AIDS. Some thought it was caused by use of nitrite drugs, or "poppers," a popular inhalant used frequently by gays. Nitrites were shown to depress the immune system, as was the ingestion of large amounts of sperm. Researchers saw sperm had negative effects on laboratory animals and since



AIDS patients averaged many more sexual partners per year than healthy gay men (60 and 25 respectively), that theory seemed plausible. Another theory: gay men with a history of STDs constantly tax their immune systems, turning them on and off until finally they overload and become ineffective.

But these theories are giving way, as the disease spreads to other segments of the population. Today, 75 percent of the victims are gay men, but also affected in significant numbers are hemophiliacs, intravenous drug abusers, and mysteriously, Haitians. AIDS has also attacked surgical patients receiving blood transfusions, 22 children born to Haitians and IV drug abusing mothers, female sexual partners of IV drug abusers and newborns who needed transfusions.

With this new information, the panic light flashed at the Department of Health and Human Services. Some medical investigators fear the disease has contaminated the emergency blood supplies. Upon the suggestion that homosexuals be banned from giving blood, the department is working on proposals that would provide stricter screening of blood donors to eliminate those who belong to groups at risk for AIDS, said *The New York Times Magazine*.

So now where does this leave researchers? "Scared," said Dr. Harold Jaffe, assistant director of the AIDS Task force in *Rolling Stone*. "With most diseases, the more you learn about them, the less scared you are. With this disease, the more I learn, the more scared I am," he said.

One thing researchers do seem confident about is that AIDS is contagious, passed through drug needles or sexual intercourse. It may be linked to

poor hygiene and could be spread through oral-fecal contacts in, for example, food handling. New evidence published in the *New York Native* links a depressed immune system with an improper balance of vitamins and minerals in a diet. One possible theory is that AIDS is an infectious agent, some type of virus or opportunistic infection, which travels in the bloodstream. Some researchers think it is a mutation of the CMV virus, a member of the herpes family, prevalent in one form or another in most gay men. Or perhaps it is a virus coming from Africa, where Kaposi's Sarcoma is the most common cancer in men, particularly in Uganda.

Rosemarie LeGasse, director at the Bangor STD Clinic, said so far no cases of AIDS have been reported in Maine. However, the incubation period for the disease is anywhere from six months to two years. As Dr. William Darrow from the Centers for Disease Control said in *The New York Times Magazine*, "The disease could be anywhere now." Already, the disease has spread through 10 countries and 32 states, with the greatest concentrations in New York first and California second. But this means people who have already been infected might not know it until mid-1983 or late in 1984. By then, each carrier might have unknowingly infected hundreds of individuals.

LeGasse said one of the biggest problems facing AIDS is ignorance: "Most people don't know what it is; those who do, assume that it is a disease only for gay people. It is not." She said a person should realize what populations are at risk. These include:

- young, sexually active people, particularly those with a history of sexually transmitted diseases.
- people with poor nutrition.
- people who engage in anal and oral sex.
- intravenous drug abusers and people who use nitrite drugs.

On the local end, people like LeGasse are doing what they can to help AIDS victims, unfortunately with little success. Treatment is experimental and costly. Testing for AIDS alone can cost the patient as much as \$600 and further treatment, including chemotherapy, costs even more.

Researchers look at the future with uncertainty, relying on limited funds: a \$2 million grant from Congress given in December, private contributions and a modest 0.2 percent of the National Cancer Institute's budget. But these funds increase at a rate nowhere near that of the disease. Researchers predict the number of cases will double every six months. It is only going to get worse before it gets better.