

Opinion

The worst enemy

More devastating than the AIDS epidemic that is sweeping the nation, is the epidemic of fear that is following in the wake of the virus. It's time to stop denying people civil liberties every time someone cries AIDS.

Now insurance companies are getting sucked into the tempest of anti-AIDS sentiments. Many are refusing coverage to applicants who show symptoms of AIDS.

But the methods most of these companies are using to find symptoms is unreliable. Blood tests have been found to be up to 80 percent inaccurate in determining if a person has AIDS.

Obviously, AIDS victims could have a devastating effect on the insurance market. But companies could limit such exclusion from coverage to people who have a manifestation of the virus, not people who merely show symptoms or are at high risk for contracting the disease.

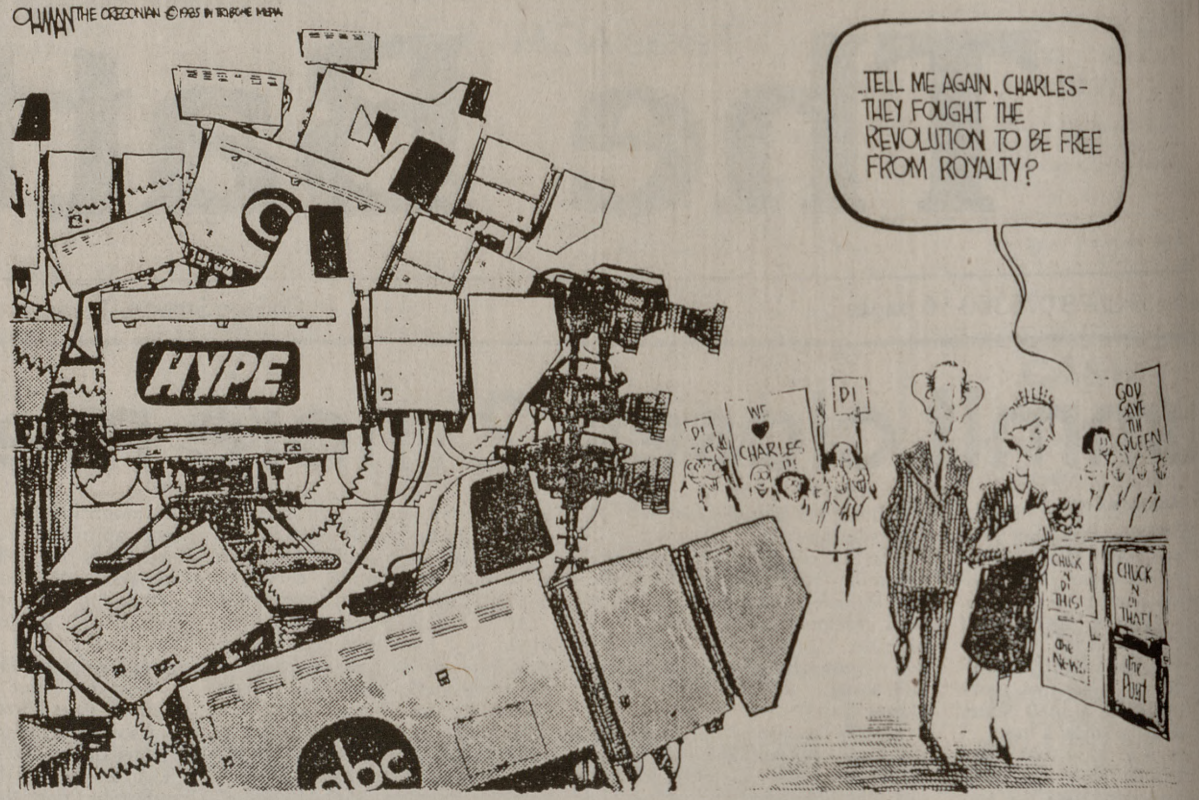
Dr. James Mason, acting assistant secretary for health announced Nov. 14, in the first set of federal AIDS guidelines, that the virus should be dealt with in much the same manner as hepatitis-B.

The guidelines also deemed blood testing of employees unnecessary, stressing that AIDS cannot be spread through casual contact.

AIDS is a serious problem, but its time to put the AIDSphobia in the country to rest. Progress has been made in understanding and curtailing the spread of the virus.

The worst enemy now is not the virus itself, but the fear of it.

The Battalion Editorial Board



Seeing NASA from the other side of the ropes

I swung my legs through the small round hole that led into the cabin of the space shuttle.



Camille Brown

I swung with authority, playing up to the expectations of the camera-toting tourists watching from behind a red rope about 100 feet away. Maybe they thought I was an astronaut. I waved to them from the windows inside the shuttle and they excitedly waved back.

I could identify with the tourists trapped behind the red rope, but this time I had a pass to go beyond it. I was touring the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's training facilities at the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center in Houston. It was a tour which led to a first-hand encounter with space suits, mock-up space shuttles, space toilets, clean rooms and bootlegged cargo. It was also my attempt at finding out what's behind one of those shuttle missions.

After five hours of walking through the training facilities, I found myself sitting in the driver's seat of the G-1 Trainer, a high fidelity mock-up of the space shuttle.

This white plywood space shuttle is one of the final stops in a training process followed by every astronaut who goes into space. Before astronauts go on a shuttle mission, they have to be taught the basics of living all over again. Zero gravity has a new set of rules which have to be learned.

One of the trainers, Phil Mongan, was my guide. Mongan, a 1983 A&M graduate with a degree in mechanical engi-

neering, teaches astronauts how to cook, clean, go to the restroom, and familiarizes them with loose equipment they'll use on the trip. He also teaches pre-launch and post landing emergency exit procedures.

He teaches the astronauts the new set of rules they'll have to live by during the mission. In zero gravity, basic things like sitting in a chair become obsolete, and setting things down becomes impossible.

Velcro and gray tape are as essential as food.

Yellow-painted handles on the walls replace walkways.

Ceilings and floors simply become walls. Days and nights are realized by the digital read-out on a clock. Technical jargon, switches, dials and screens are the astronauts' lifeblood.

Every item on board is accounted for. Even the toothpaste has been weighed, checked, cleared, cleaned and evaluated.

And checked again.

But there are always surprises. Like the "I love Tom Selleck" bumper sticker that astronaut Judy Resnik sneaked on board her shuttle trip.

Children's artwork, Cabbage Patch dolls, airplane models, stickers, pins, charms, wedding rings and flags are some of the stuff found in the lockers on the shuttle. Some of the junk has clearance, some of it is bootlegged on board. The people who find the contraband are workers in NASA's pre-pack facility, where shuttle cargo is unloaded and packed for each mission. The engineers who work there will say bootlegging is serious, but that doesn't stop the astronauts from sneaking or the pre-pack people from laughing at the crazy things they find.

When I was there, they had just un-

covered a colored picture in toddler's scrawlings and an Auburn University sticker that the last shuttle crew had forgotten to recover. One of the strangest pieces of flight hardware they've handled was an economy-size package of oatmeal.

The actual flight hardware is packed



into lockers in a special environment called the Clean Room. From here it is shipped to the Kennedy Space Center, then loaded onto the shuttle. Getting into the Clean Room is like preparing for surgery.

After walking through two machines built for the sole purpose of brushing dirt off shoes, I scrubbed my hands and entered the dressing room. The pieces to a white suit were wrapped in plastic bags, which meant the hats, gloves and booties were sterile. A shiny white lab coat finished off the suit, and after a quick air shower I could enter the Clean Room.

Inside the controlled environment is actual flight hardware — the stuff that

will fly on the shuttle. It's pampered, protected, carefully packed and wrapped in plastic before it's shipped to Florida.

Most of the cargo had already been shipped when I was there in preparation for the Nov. 27 shuttle flight, officially called STS 61-B.

Outside the Clean Room, and throughout all the numbered NASA buildings, it seemed to be sterile as well. Everything was clean and clipped and everyone wore at least one plastic identification badge. Tour groups hustled from one viewing area to the next.

My next stop was the Waste Control Systems building. Mongan led me straight to the toilet trainer room. Two space toilets sat side by side: one worked, one was rigged with a camera. To teach an astronaut the correct sitting position on the toilet seat, a video camera and lights were placed inside the toilet — pointing up. When an astronaut sits on the seat, he can look at a television screen in front of him and see if he made it over the hole.

Mongan said most of the time they miss. After they master the position, they graduate to the real toilet and put in some practice.

I ended up on the mock-up of the shuttle, sitting behind a sea of buttons, screens and gadgets on the flight deck. Velcro patches were everywhere.

Living quarters were tight — smaller than the average dorm room.

In the airlock, a space suit hung on a rack. Two people helped me struggle into the suit from the bottom up. It felt like I'd just been put into metal box, because it weighed so much I could just hang there and try to flap my arms. I probably lost five pounds trying to move in that bulky suit of armor, and five more trying to get out of it. I have new

respect for the astronauts who have to get anything accomplished from the confines of a space suit.

Outside the shuttle cabin, training was going on. One of the astronauts from the upcoming mission was doing some last minute practice on maneuvering the Canadian space arm. The mission commander for the Nov. 27 mission, Lt. Col. Brewster Shaw, was sitting on some steps watching.

Between sips of coffee, Shaw looked up shyly and said that his part of the mission is fun — the guys on the ground do all the work. But the serious look behind his calm eyes told me he felt the pressure.

As the astronauts were going through the last phases of training for the next mission, no one could believe the launch date was a week away. Mongan had finished conducting his last training class for the STS 61-B flight, and would start with a new crew of astronauts the same week.

Mongan said, "When we're all in here (the G-1 Trainer) talking, the astronauts are all excited and deciding who's going to do what and what they're going to bring. It's like we're preparing for a camping trip, and I don't get to go."

That's one camping trip my girl scout troop never took. I would've been the first to sign up.

But last Friday, I got a close look at what it might be like to go into space. It was a glimpse of NASA from behind the threatening signs that read "Authorized Personnel Only," and it was a shot at understanding the mystique behind those space heroes, the astronauts.

Now I've walked a mile in their space boots.

Camille Brown is a senior journalism major and a columnist for The Battalion.

Mail Call

Simultaneous solutions

EDITOR:

Having been to Berlin a couple of times and having seen the effectiveness of the Berlin Wall in keeping the people of the East bloc behind the iron curtain, a marvelous simultaneous solution to several international problems has dawned on me.

Provided the domino effect is as threatening as we are led to believe by right-wing politicians, the following plan should work admirably. First, we solve the tensions in Central America by unilaterally withdrawing all support from the region. One after the other, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico will fall into communist hands.

The new Russian puppets in power in Mexico, having learned the lesson of Berlin from 1961, will immediately begin construction of a wall on their side of the Rio Grande to prevent their labor force from escaping to freedom, and viola! We have not only solved the problems of Central America but also our own immigration problem.

We will be able to rest assured that the new Mexican border patrol (trained in East Germany) — equipped with roving searchlights and machine guns, not to mention the impenetrable wall designed with the latest German engineering — will be far more effective

than our INS.

Not only will this solution not cost us a cent, it will actually save us millions of dollars in aid to our southern neighbors (which we will have slyly forced the Soviet Union to pick up), as well as almost all of the INS budget!

Brian Sterling '86

Replies missed the point

EDITOR:

A sharp criticism of bonfire drew a reply which missed the point. The clearing of land for food production or energy extraction does not justify the destruction of the timber; more food production is just what American agriculture does not need, and wood, too, is energy. It's naive to take as our own values the profit motives of land-exploitation companies.

The criticism was not of the joy students find in working together toward a common goal, but of an act of destruction unnecessary to this goal. Immense blazes, and A-bombs, are indeed awesome displays of power, but the real power is in the heart. The burning desire doesn't turn into ashes.

If the wood harvested by enthusiastic Aggies were split into 250 cords having a sale value to homeowners of \$80-120 apiece, each replacing 8,000 kwh of electri-

city or 11,000 cubic feet of propane — energy from non-renewable sources — the profit after expenses should be at least \$16,000 and there should be several truckloads of small stuff left for a respectable bonfire.

Suppose this gift were put into a scholarship fund for agronomy and ecology students from among the two and a half billion people who depend on wood for 50 to 100 percent of their energy and are destroying forests necessary for soil and water retention, climate moderation and genetic reservoirs at a disastrous pace.

At A&M these students could study the establishment and management of multi-use plantations of tree varieties under study here.

If we can make a difference to many people by scaling down our costly self-entertainment, will it not bring far more honor to us and our school than persisting in a tradition started at a time when ecological foresight and technology were limited?

Jim Nelson

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