

AIDS Symposium

Health official: AIDS war becoming U.S. priority

By Kirsten Dietz
Senior Staff Writer

By 1991 about 270,000 cases of AIDS will be diagnosed and about \$37 billion will be spent on health care for these AIDS victims, a public health adviser for the Texas Department of Health said Tuesday.

Dr. Thomas Walch, speaking to about 60 people at a public health forum on AIDS at Bryan's Brazos Center, said these alarming statistics have spurred the federal government to make battling AIDS a high priority. He said the government attack is three-pronged and consists of research, patient care and education.

This year, he said, \$54 million is available from the federal government to develop programs in six areas: education of school children, drug abuse intervention, health education/risk reduction, surveillance of trends, service demonstration grants



Graphic by M. Rohsner

and regional training center grants. Texas will receive a share of the money in each of these areas.

The Reagan administration also has unveiled a plan to control AIDS, a plan which has received considerable opposition, Walch said. The plan centers around routine AIDS testing for prisoners, immigrants,

aliens and marriage license applicants. Opponents of the widespread routine testing argue that the results of the program are not likely to offset the logistics and costs involved in administering the program, he said.

While the most conservative estimates place the development of a vaccine more than 20 years away, Walch said that all the AIDS-related news is not bad.

"Achievements made in protecting the blood supply and the discovery of new treatments for AIDS patients represent recent gains of considerable note," he said.

In addition, the Senate Labor Health and Human Services Committee recently recommended that appropriations for AIDS research in fiscal 1988 increase from \$550 million to \$605 million, Walch said. He added that the recommendation had bipartisan support and that funding for all AIDS-related programs has increased by at least two-thirds.

Health expert: AIDS will kill 750,000 Americans by 1997

By Robert Morris
Staff Writer

An estimated 1.5 million Americans are infected with HTLV-III, the virus that causes AIDS, and more than half of them will be dead within the next 10 years unless a cure is found, Dr. Thomas G. Betz said.

Betz, the chief of the Texas Department of Health's Bureau of Communicable Diseases, gave the lecture on the "AIDS epidemic" as part of an AIDS forum sponsored by the Brazos Valley Public Health Coalition.

The HTLV-III virus remains in the white blood cells attacks and is currently thought to spend four to nine years in incubation, Betz said. However, it isn't the infection that kills, it is the ultimate breakdown of the immune system that, in at least half the cases, will eventually cause death, he said.

And those that are infected but fail to develop any physical symptoms of the illness are able to spread the virus to others through sexual contact, including penile-gingiva, penis-rectum, mouth-rectum, mouth-vagina, mouth-penis contact, and/or intravenous drug use, Betz said.

AIDS is a sexually-oriented disease, transmitted especially well through homosexual anal intercourse, yet it also can be transmitted from heterosexual men to women and women to men with the latter being the most difficult manner of transmission, Betz said.

About 70 percent of AIDS victims throughout the country are male homosexuals and bisexuals. Intravenous drug users make up 17 percent of the AIDS population, with the heterosexual community making up 13 percent.

The infection of the heterosexual population has come from several areas, most of them centered on sexual transmission, Betz said.

Sexual activity with bisexuals, prostitutes, other infected heterosexuals with multiple partners and the sharing of intravenous needles are the only known causes of AIDS in the heterosexual community, he said.

Yet, he stressed that AIDS is not an easy disease to catch.

"AIDS outside the human body is very fragile, and casual contact does not cause AIDS," he said.

In support of this, he quoted a study of 1,758 exposed health-care workers in which 1.5 percent tested positive for HTLV-III; of those, 23 belonged to a high-risk group.

Betz defined high-risk groups as homosexuals, bisexuals, intravenous drug users and heterosexuals with multiple sex partners.

It is these groups, especially the first three, that are in the greatest danger.

At this time, whites make up the majority of the cases currently detected. However, blacks and Hispanics have a disproportionate percentage, he said.

Betz emphasized that the majority of AIDS victims are vital members of the community with an average education level of 17 years, and 68 percent of them fall into the 29 to 49 year age bracket.

While Betz said that safe sex, or the use of condoms to prevent the exchange of body fluids, is an effective method of prevention, he emphasized that heterosexual sexual relations with multiple partners is a dangerous practice and that homosexual activity of any kind is extremely risky.

Panel calls education key to stopping spread of AIDS

By Kirsten Dietz
Senior Staff Writer

Education of the public, including children, is the key to stopping the spread of AIDS, three county and state health officials agreed Tuesday during a panel discussion on the community impact of the disease.

The panel was part of an afternoon public health forum held at the Brazos Center in Bryan. Included on the panel were Dr. Thomas Walch, a public health adviser with the Texas Department of Health, Dr. Thomas Betz, chief of the Texas Department of Health's Bureau of Communicable Diseases, and Allen Noah, a Brazos County Health Department counselor for people with sexually transmitted diseases. Dr. Jack Marsh, director of the Brazos County Health Department, was the moderator.

Because no cure for AIDS is expected to be developed in the next few years, people need to learn what AIDS is and how it is spread so they can practice prevention, the panelists said. This includes those in small communities, Betz said, who believe AIDS occurs only in larger cities. While the disease is prevalent in larger cities, he said AIDS is spreading. For example, he said Brazos County, with a population of about 100,000, has 13 reported cases of the disease — only slightly lower than the state average of 15 reported cases per 100,000 people.

But because the AIDS virus can incubate up to five years before being detected, Betz said there is no way of knowing exactly how many people currently are infected.

"We're dealing with the tip of the iceberg, but it's the rest of the iceberg we're concerned about," he said.

Walch said children hear frank discussions about AIDS on television newscasts and other programs, both on private and public television. The school system and parents need to

match the educational efforts of the media, he said.

"I personally see no reason why the school system shouldn't take a systematic, K-through-12 (kindergarten through 12th grade) approach on a very factual, very non-emotional basis and do the same thing," Walch said. "You teach prevention all the way from abstinence to safe sex."

"I understand the perspective about community values and community needs, but my personal feeling is you might as well tell the kids about what they're seeing on the TV or in the streets anyway. That way you reinforce the very best that can be taught about both worlds."

Betz agreed, saying, "I don't think a lot of people are getting the message."

The panel also discussed mandatory AIDS testing. According to law, testing in Texas will become mandatory for couples applying for a marriage license if the overall state AIDS prevalence rate reaches 0.83 percent of the population, Betz said.

However, he said, "We have no idea how we're going to determine that."

Current rates range from 0.04 percent in low-risk groups to 64 percent in sexually transmitted disease clinics, Betz said. The statewide prevalence rate falls somewhere between the two, he said.

In general, Betz does not advocate mandatory testing because he said it does not benefit the people being tested.

"Even if they are found to be positive, there's nothing you can do to treat their infections," he said. "Even if they're found to be negative, they may be incubating the virus and the fact that they're engaged in sexual activities may affect transmission because they have been given a false sense of security in that window period between the time of the infection and the development of antibodies."

Walch and Betz also agreed the

community should support AIDS patients who return to the community and to the schools. Walch said AIDS patients need support services because, once the infection is discovered, they incur tremendous financial burdens and a large number of the patients lose their jobs because they are fired or because they are too sick to work.

"I think the community should be supportive and not try to put a tattoo on a person's forehead, brand an 'A' on their chests and turn them loose in the streets," he said.

Betz said that while most people fear AIDS patients who return to the community, this fear is unfounded unless the patient begins to have unprotected sex or to share needles to inject drugs (two of the ways AIDS is spread).

"Most people with AIDS are responsible," he said. "They realize the risks involved. In fact, they probably represent less of a risk to the community than those with asymptomatic HIV (the AIDS virus) infections who don't know they have it and who are out there thinking that they're safe and are not putting anyone at risk. Yet they are."

Betz said many parents are worried about children with AIDS attending school and infecting their children. In fact, he said, the infected children are the ones at risk. Because they're immune systems are damaged, they are susceptible to diseases carried by the other children, he said.

After the panel discussion, Dr. Charles Webb, director of Public Health Region 6 of the Texas Department of Health, said the purpose of Tuesday's afternoon seminar was to make community leaders aware that AIDS is an important problem, even in Brazos County. While Webb said 300 community leaders had been invited to the seminar, only about 60 people were at the panel discussion.

"Many of the people who should be here are not here," he said.

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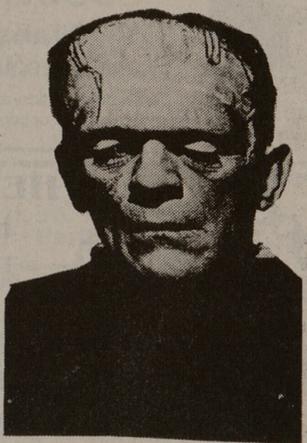
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