

Researchers predict premarital AIDS tests would be unfeasible

CHICAGO (AP) — Mandatory AIDS tests for couples wishing to marry, a measure already endorsed by three states, would be an ineffective, inefficient and costly way to combat the deadly disease, researchers say.

"The general belief is premarital screening is inexpensive, unobtrusive and that it will have a large impact on the spread of the virus," said Paul Cleary, a researcher with the Harvard School of Public Health. "That's just not so."

"AIDS screening is seen by too many people as a quick fix, and may in fact be a harmful distraction from the more difficult task of developing a comprehensive policy to deal with the problem."

Cleary is one of six authors who performed a cost-benefit analysis of premarital screening.

The group reported its findings in Friday's Journal of the American Medical Association.

The researchers estimate 3.8 million people nationwide plan to marry each year, and the potential cost for screening, testing and counseling of them would exceed \$100 million annually.

Illinois, Louisiana and Texas have enacted measures calling for some form of premarital testing by next year, and researchers noted that as of July 31, 79 bills on the subject had been introduced in 35 states.

But the researchers concluded that people planning marriage already have been shown to be a

low-risk population for AIDS and that premarital screening would detect fewer than 0.1 percent of people infected with the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, a precursor to AIDS in a still-undetermined percentage.

AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is spread most often through sexual contact, needles or syringes shared by drug abusers, infected blood or blood products and from pregnant women to their offspring. Homosexual and bisexual men and intravenous drug abusers have been hardest hit by the disease that has killed at least 24,400 people in this country. The researchers also estimated that while as many as 9,000 of the 3.8 million people screened would

test positive on a screening test, only 1,200 people would show up positive on a second, confirmatory test.

"And even with a series of tests, there will still be a substantial number of errors," Cleary said in a telephone interview. "That may be acceptable, given the goal — stopping the spread of AIDS."

"But its impact on the spread of the disease is uncertain and these errors (false-positive results) can prove very harmful."

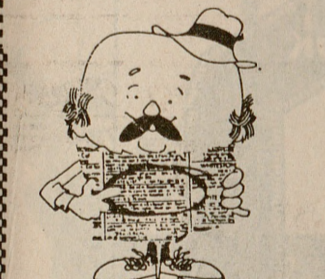
"Even so, it should be emphasized that this particular analysis doesn't argue against testing other populations. We simply suggest they analyze a number of factors before going ahead."

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