

AIDS apathy in Texas worries health authorities, educators

Lack of funds, legislation hinder efforts in state

AUSTIN (AP) — With more than 6,000 confirmed cases, AIDS continues its deadly spread across Texas, but health authorities say they are frustrated by public apathy and lack of money and legislation to battle the disease.

"Obviously it is increasing," said Dr. Robert Bernstein, the state health commissioner. "There is no sign of it leveling out. But there doesn't seem to be any groundswell to do much about it."

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Dr. Robert Wirag, director of the student health center at the University of Texas at Austin, agreed, saying sexual activity among college students doesn't reflect a widespread concern about spread of the disease.

"There's a tremendous amount of apathy," Wirag told the *Austin American-Statesman*. "Our lectures and presentations aren't getting the attendance they deserve."

Wirag said campus health officials are seeing the consequences of "a lot of indiscriminate" sexual activity.

"The rate of infection with the virus that causes genital warts, say, is slowly increasing," he said. "That's the scary part. We're wondering what's going on."

Eight years into the worldwide epidemic of acquired immune deficiency syndrome, California, with the second-largest number of full AIDS cases in the nation, spends \$100 million annually on education and prevention.

Texas, with the fifth largest number of AIDS cases

nationwide, tries to get by on \$2 million a year in state spending.

The state Department of Health this year is asking the Texas Legislature for \$45 million for the biennium for education, prevention and treatment programs recommended by the Legislative Task Force on AIDS. But Bernstein said he was not confident the full request will be granted.

The state's current spending was cited by the AIDS task force as one reason the health department has been unable to conduct normal epidemiological surveys to determine frequencies and distributions of the process of infection.

However, Bernstein said the biggest reason the state has not been able to conduct adequate epidemiological surveys has been the continued unwillingness of lawmakers to provide protection from AIDS discrimination.

He said that has limited health authorities to surveys where they can be sure of fully protecting a participant's confidentiality.

"Because as soon as we start naming names there's discrimination," Bernstein said. "And there's no question there is discrimination out there against these people."

Without better surveys of the infection process, authorities are left to ponder infection statistics they know are incomplete.

So far in Texas, the vast majority of the 6,140 people diagnosed with full AIDS have been gay or bisexual men — 75 percent of them Anglo, 13 percent Black and 12 percent Hispanic, according to state figures.

Statewide infection statistics, which have been collected only since September 1987, total 3,337 cases of infection with the virus, which experts say remains transmissible for life. About 350 of those cases are women.

The health department's best indicator so far of what may be going on in the Texas heterosexual community is a recently completed anonymous survey of blood taken from newborns in the state's hospitals from April to July 1988, Bernstein said.

Conducted with federal assistance, the survey found 94 per 100,000 newborns infected.

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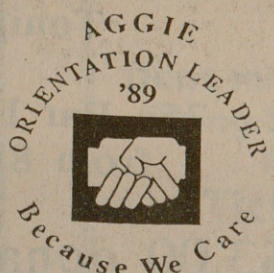
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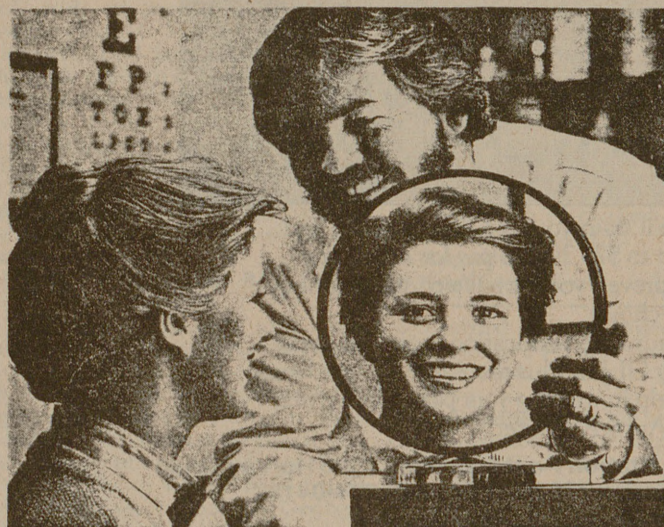
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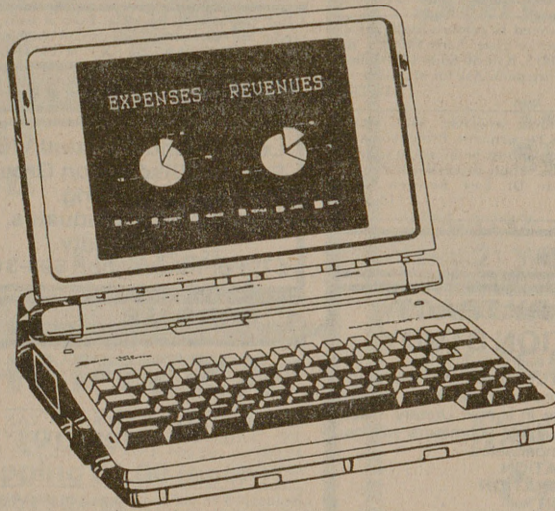
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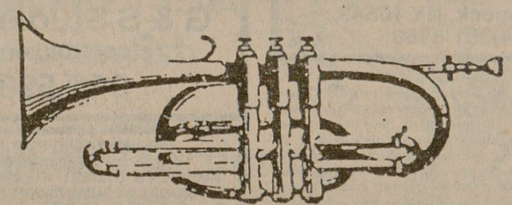
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