

10

AIDS IN SCOTLAND

Mystery virus claims two

ACQUIRED IMMUNO-DEFICIENCY SYNDROME (AIDS), the mystery killer disease, has arrived in Scotland, according to Blood Transfusion Service sources. Two cases are highly suspected, though not yet confirmed, in Edinburgh and Tayside. The Edinburgh case is known to be a gay man who has recently returned from New York. Little is known of the Tayside case except that he is not a Scot.

The South-East Scotland Blood Transfusion Service is known to be gravely concerned. They fear not only that the gay population is at risk, but also that by giving blood they may 'contaminate' blood stocks and pass on AIDS. Consultant in sexually transmitted diseases at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, Dr Sandy McMillan told GAY SCOTLAND, "It is only a matter of time before more AIDS cases are confirmed in Edinburgh and Glasgow."

Authorities helpless

The Scottish Home and Health Department (which has already given grants to Dr McMillan for research into gay-related diseases) is known to be very worried about the health services' ability to cope with a major AIDS epidemic in Scotland. As one source explained to us, "There are no satisfactory tests we can make to tell if a person may have AIDS. Medical facilities are too crude to help diagnose the virus. We just don't know enough about the disease yet to be able to fight it."

This confirms a growing sense of helplessness in medical circles around Europe and in the United States. No-one has yet even identified what causes AIDS although the chief suspect is thought to be a sexually transmitted virus.

Doctor appeals to gays

Scottish venereologists were told at a conference in May to provide a screening programme for gay patients. Checking regularly each patient's general health holds hope of spotting AIDS symptoms at an early stage. Dr McMillan has appealed for gays to visit their local VD clinics for regular AIDS checks. "No-one need feel they are wasting our time. Just come in and say you want an AIDS check and we will oblige."

"Don't panic"

The Scottish Homosexual Rights Group, in a press statement last month, warned against panic and panic measures. They are concerned that straight newspapers have characterised AIDS as a "gays-only" disease. SHRG says this is not true and is dangerous misinformation. Nonetheless SHRG recognises that of all victims 70% are gay and has called upon the medical authorities to devote more time and money on research into the disease.

Leading figures in the commercial gay scene are arranging fund-raising events for research

A Special report
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funds. SHRG thinks that money raised in this way should stay in Scotland, but should be used to publish factsheets updating the gay community on the disease and any preventative measures which can be taken. This approach has been endorsed by both the Blood Transfusion Service and Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, who are eager to work with the gay community. "Your co-operation and help are vital in containing this disease," said Deputy Director Doctor F.E. Boulton at a recent meeting with SHRG.

SHRG secured a major success in its consultations with medical authorities by having a proposed leaflet withdrawn because it was seen as anti-gay and likely to cause panic. A revised leaflet drawn up jointly by SHRG and the South-East Scotland Blood Transfusion Service has now been agreed (See opposite). The leaflet will be available in donor centres and is also to be distributed through pubs and clubs.

Gays, NHS to work together

The Blood Transfusion Service and Dr. McMillan have both agreed to the formation of a monitoring group with SHRG in order that gays themselves know what is happening as soon as it happens. An SHRG representative stated that Scotland was the only place in Britain where the gay community has been taken fully into the confidence of the medical profession. "Our advice and help are being asked for," he said, "and in return we are being given a good deal of say in how the issue is to be presented to the public."

A meeting to be held at Fire Island, 127 Princes Street, Edinburgh on 27 July will be the first public airing of the AIDS issue to the capital's gay population. Bob Orr of Lavender Menace bookshop, and one of the meeting's organisers, hopes that a national group will emerge to co-ordinate much of the fundraising work being done throughout Scotland. Lavender Menace will also have copies of *The Advocate Guide to Gay Health* available for sale at the meeting. This is considered as "the standard gay health guide" in the US and contains a valuable and authoritative chapter of AIDS.

Limiting the disease

One thing is certain, AIDS will not pass us by in Scotland, and for the first time in many years the gay community is under serious attack, not this time by bigots, but by an anonymous virus which in the grim words of one very senior doctor, "kills gays like flies." But with only two cases so far reported it is worth noting that more people in Scotland will die from hepatitis in the next twelve months than will die from AIDS. We should all be concerned, but panic helps no-one.

Working together and acting quickly in response to new developments, we can limit the damage. There is unlikely to be the kind of epidemic we have seen in the USA. Social circumstances are so radically different here that the virus is unlikely to move through the gay scene with the same speed and ferocity as in the tightly incestuous gay communities of California and New York.

As yet we have no words of advice, except...WATCH THIS SPACE.

GAY SCOTLAND - will carry full exclusive reports on the AIDS as it develops and welcomes contributions from readers. Next issue we report on the discovery by microbiologists at two Scottish Universities of a powder which has been reported as a likely treatment.

AIDS AND BLOOD TRANSFUSION

The advisory leaflet on AIDS and blood transfusion published by the South-East Scotland Blood Transfusion Service has been drawn up jointly with representatives of the Scottish Homosexual Rights Group. After noting the symptoms and consequences of the disease, the leaflet identifies six risk groups who should "avoid giving blood until we have a suitable screening test". The risk groups are:

1. Men who have multiple partners of the same sex.
2. Intravenous drug abusers.
3. Haitian immigrants to the USA.
4. Haemophiliacs (through their use of blood products which may have come from a donor with AIDS).
5. Recipients of blood transfusion.
6. Sexual contacts of people at risk to AIDS.

The leaflet continues by explaining the risk caused by AIDS to haemophiliacs and recipients of blood transfusion.

If a blood donor happened to carry the agent responsible for AIDS it is possible to transmit the disease to those not usually at risk. For example, Factor VIII (the clotting factor extracted from plasma for treatment of haemophilia) could have become infected and caused AIDS in a few cases of haemophilia in the USA.

We have not had any definite cases of AIDS in haemophiliacs in the UK. If the clotting factor concentrate (Factor VIII) can be infected, then cases could occur in the UK because much of the Factor VIII is imported from the USA.

The disease cannot be taken lightly. Those getting AIDS may die, because they are more susceptible to serious infections and cancer due to their impaired immune system.

The Blood Transfusion Service is therefore concerned to try and stop any chance of infection spreading by blood transfusion. We hope that if we take precautions now, we can prevent the problem of AIDS which has become serious in the USA.

Remember it is a rare disease but an important one. Thank you for your help.