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From the Secretary of State for Social Services

The Rt Hon the Viscount Whitelaw CH MC
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21.8.

21 August 1986

Dear Lord President

AIDS - PUBLIC EDUCATION

Recent press publicity has highlighted the growing public health menace of AIDS. It has also emphasised that the only way we have of limiting the spread is by effective public education to get people to change their behaviour. The number of reported cases of AIDS is rising all the time. I attach a graph illustrating the trend in notified AIDS cases - which reflect only a small proportion of the numbers infected with the virus.

The first AIDS case in the UK was in 1981. By mid-1986 we had 465 cases and in addition probably over 30,000 people are infected with the AIDS virus. Even if we halted the spread of infection now we could expect about 2,000 cases of AIDS by 1988. But at the estimated current rate of infection we could have between 100,000 and 200,000 infected persons by then each capable of spreading the infection. At least 25 per cent of those infected and possibly considerably more - we simply don't know as yet - will develop AIDS and die. These deaths will not be confined to homosexuals, bisexuals and drug addicts but will increasingly include others such as their sexual partners. The children of infected mothers have been infected during pregnancy or during birth. Already more than one baby has died from AIDS, and many more are known to be infected.

Faced with this prospect I am convinced that we must step up considerably our public education campaign this year and beyond. The present newspaper advertising needs to be sustained and developed and the messages put over more simply and clearly. I have approved a further round of advertising for September and we shall be developing a campaign aimed particularly at young people,

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alongside our main campaign aimed at the general public, and the work which voluntary bodies are doing with our help to influence the high risk groups of injecting drug abusers and committed homosexuals. I am enclosing for information copies of the advertising material from which we shall be selecting the September advertisements. There may of course be some minor changes in the final versions used.

But we need as soon as possible to make a special effort to bring home to people the real magnitude of the risks from AIDS, what must be done if we are to control it and the priority the Government gives to this. Having considered the options, I propose that we should have an AIDS leaflet delivered to every household in the UK spelling out in simple and explicit language what they need to know. A number of other countries, including West Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Denmark have already done this. The leaflet 'drop' will need substantial related advertising and other publicity to ensure it gets maximum attention. The aim will be to achieve this in November. I would hope in this single step to achieve a breakthrough in public recognition of the seriousness of the problem. We shall be able also to say more in the leaflet than has been possible in the newspaper advertising or would be possible in television commercials.

The exercise will need careful preparation and special steps to minimise the risk of offence whilst not watering down the messages. These will include some sample testing of the leaflet, and warning on the envelope and in the pre-drop publicity about the use of explicit language. There will still be criticism but I think we must accept that as a necessary price to be paid.

I should be glad to know that I have colleagues' support for this action which I would hope we could agree should be on a UK basis. If so I will circulate the text of the leaflet as soon as a suitable version is available and provide more details about the arrangements. The cost, with associated publicity, is likely to be up to £2 million. I will find most of that but I hope that Malcolm Rifkind, Tom King and Nicholas Edwards will make pro rata contributions.

I am copying this minute to other members of H Committee, the Ministerial Committee on AIDS, to the Prime Minister and Sir Robert Armstrong. I would be glad to have responses before the end of this month as firm decisions will be needed by then if the leaflet drop is to go ahead by end November. If we miss that deadline it has to be postponed until the New Year and time is not on our side.

Yours sincerely

GRO-C

PP NORMAN FOWLER -

(Approved by the Secretary of State
and signed in his absence)