

PRESS RELEASE

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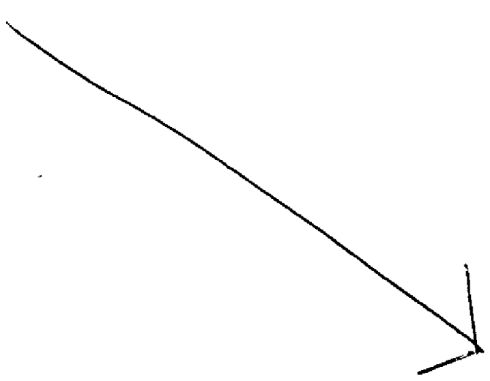
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NORMAN FOWLER'S STATEMENT AT AIDS CONFERENCE

The following is the text of the statement by Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, at today's press conference on the AIDS publicity campaign:

"There is no doubt at all about the importance of the public education campaign. The reality is that at present we have no medical defences against AIDS. There is no vaccine and no cure. And the experts agree that an effective vaccine is not expected within 5 years - if then. That is why public education is the only vaccine we have.

"This is not just a UK view. It is widely shared in the international community. The World Health Organisation regard public education as a top priority. This reflects the very serious position world wide. The WHO's estimate of the scale of the epidemic world wide is:



- 100,000 cases to date;
- 5 - 10 million with HIV infection to date;
- assuming 10 - 30 per cent of these with the infection develop the disease then within the next 5 years we can expect from about 500,000 to 3 million deaths.

As far as the UK itself is concerned, whatever we do now it is likely that as many as 4,000 people will have died of AIDS in the UK by the end of this decade. The object of the education campaign is to stop the spread of the virus now so that in the 1990s the number of deaths from AIDS does not continue to escalate.

Public education campaign

What this all means is that the only way of slowing down and the halting the spread of infection is for everyone to behave in a way which minimises the chance of their being infected. But to achieve this position we have to do two things:

- we have to explain to the public how the virus is passed on and how you can protect yourself against it;
- and we have to convince the public of the risks of certain behaviour and of the need to change their behaviour and take the necessary precautions.

// This has been an unprecedented campaign in this country. We have, of course, tried to learn as much as we could from other countries. But in many ways, we are pioneering here. For example, in the breadth of the campaign and in the way we are working with the media to get the message across.

Because we are pioneering, we have been deliberately taking it step by step. At the same time, we have been trying to strike the right balance on four separate aspects of the campaign.

// First, in getting messages across to specific groups in the community such as homosexuals and drug misusers at the same time as getting messages across to the community at large.

// Second, in getting the messages across in language that is direct and effective but is regarded by the public as necessary and acceptable.

// Third, on the moral issues concerned. I shall return to this point.

// Fourth, and most important, we have to convince people of the urgency of the situation without causing unnecessary personal alarm and panic. AIDS is still confined very largely to particular groups. But it could spread more widely into the general population - as it has already done in Africa. So in pitching the tone and content of our message on this point we have a particularly difficult but important balance to strike.

// Let me add, I fully accept that there is a moral issue for each of us as individuals. But this does not alter the Government's responsibility to take practical steps to reduce the spread of the disease. So we have been concentrating on explaining the facts and convincing people of the urgency of the problem.

// In addition, however, I am discussing the public education campaign and the issues behind it with church leaders. My own view is that the Government's aim of teaching prudence is complementary to the teachings of the church and other religious leaders. Let me stress I do not regard our approaches as in any way opposed - nor I believe do those ~~church~~ ^{with} leaders I have so far been able to discuss these matters. I expect these discussions to continue so that we can work together to develop a compassionate and caring response to the needs of all those afflicted by the virus and the disease.

The leaflet delivery

// The next stage in the public education campaign is next week's leaflet delivery. Over two to three weeks from 12 January, every household will receive a leaflet about AIDS. It will be in a clearly marked envelope, so everyone will know what it is before they read it. And a TV commercial will emphasise the importance of studying it carefully.

// The leaflet is a serious document. I very much hope that everyone will take its message seriously and, where necessary, act upon it.

Effectiveness of public education

There is good evidence that knowledge about AIDS and the AIDS virus can lead to quite dramatic changes in sexual behaviour. For example, in England the incidence of infectious syphilis in men has declined by about 40 per cent since 1983. As far as gonorrhoea is concerned, one London clinic reports that the incidence of this condition amongst homosexuals has ~~been~~ halved in the last three years. Similar findings have been reported from a number of other countries and there seems little doubt that these trends reflect substantial changes in sexual behaviour. Health education in this field can help and we are determined to do our best to see that it is effective. Research shows that our campaign is making an input. 69 per cent of people have seen our recent advertising - very high by normal press advertising standards. 73 per cent of those people who said they had seen the advertisements said they felt either very or fairly confident they knew enough about AIDS to avoid the risk of catching it.

The recent MORI poll in the Times showed that 26 per cent of young single men and women are now more likely to use a condom and 42 per cent of married people interviewed said they would be less likely to have extra-marital sex.

New initiatives

I have two other points to make.

// First, I have distributed details of the latest AIDS figures. These show that up to the end of December there were 610 cases in total, of whom 293 have died. This is the first in a new series of monthly reports. The figures will be given each month. And each quarter there will be a commentary which assesses the figures.

Second, I propose to convene a conference on the provision of care for AIDS sufferers outside hospital. The conference will bring together the experience of those in the relevant professions and the statutory and voluntary services. The aim will be to identify more clearly what our priorities and response should be in the years ahead. There has been much new thinking and work on this in the USA, particularly in San Francisco. I shall report to the Conference on what I have learnt from my visit to the USA later this month.

Conclusions

// Finally, may I say that I very much hope that all the media will continue to treat the AIDS issue, and the Government's response to it, ^{as} the enormously serious issue it is. AIDS is a threat to all of us. The response must come from all of us. //