

THE GUARDIAN

Killer disease baffles doctors

From Christopher Reed
in San Francisco

WHEN America's general practitioners were planning their annual conference, the agenda was to make no mention of a strange new disease called Aids. At the conference in San Francisco, it was discussed formally at least once each day.

The American College of Physicians is an extremely conservative group, but it was not just caution that caused the doctors originally to ignore Aids. Nobody could have guessed then the speed at which it would spread, although this was only in certain parts of the country. Even now among the 54,000 ACP members, a majority have never seen a case.

In 1979, Aids was unknown. By the end of March this year it had struck 1,279 people, killing more than one-third. The number of cases doubles each six months. The survival rate of those with Aids for more than two years is only one in five. It is officially an epidemic and the deadliest since swine fever ravaged the US at the end of the First World War.

There are serious fears of its spreading abroad, and it has already been found outside the US. Most worrying of all, medical scientists acknowledge that the cause and the transmission remain a mystery.

Aids is not a name, but an acronymic description. It is "acquired" rather than inherited, and "immune deficiency" is the shared factor, a collapse of the body's immune system. "Syndrome" indicates the rare but diverse diseases that take advantage of this breakdown in the body's defences.

Symptoms include a persistent flu type of fever, inexplicable weight loss, aches and pains, chronic fatigue, sore or swollen lymph glands for more than 10 days, and the appearance of purplish blemishes on the skin. (There are other ailments which cause these signs.) The deaths of victims can be slow and terrible.

What has puzzled the 100 medical researchers and technicians now investigating Aids at the US centres for disease control headquarters most of all, is not so much the symptoms, but the people who get it. At first it seemed confined to promiscuous male homosexuals who developed Kaposi's Sarcoma, an extremely rare cancer. Although the gay community still accounts for 72 per cent, it has spread to intravenous drug addicts and haemophiliacs — suggesting the cause is harboured in the blood — Haitians, and an unclassified six per cent including women and children.

The 51 Haitians are the biggest puzzle, made worse only two weeks ago by the announcement of six Aids victims from Zaire and Chad discovered in Belgium, and one 23-year-old woman from Zaire who died in France. The Haitians, 23 of whom died, had been neither homosexual nor users of injection needles or blood products.

The discovery of Aids among haemophiliacs, who depend on regular injections of blood-clotting protein from donors who may number as many as 75,000, spread alarm from the gay community to the public. The fear of contamination of blood products supplies led the National Haemophilia Foundation to call for the "removal" of male homosexuals as blood donors. This was denounced as "hasty and alarmist" by homosexual leaders and a compromise has been reached. Volunteers are asked not to give if they are promiscuous homosexuals.

The inclusion of haemophiliacs among the victims continues to concentrate suspicion on the carrier as a "transmissible agent," probably in the blood or semen. However, after three years of research there is no direct evidence of this. Neither have scientists been able to introduce Aids into laboratory animals, usually the crucial step towards identifying causes of new diseases.

As cases increase, cutting a swathe through homosexual communities in San Francisco, New York, Miami, and Los Angeles, there have been anxious reappraisals of the "gay lifestyle." One thing researchers do seem to have proved is that the promiscuous are far more vulnerable than the more restrained.

Self-appointed "leaders" from the Christian new right have predictably seized on the disease as a terrible vengeance on homosexuals for reincarnating Sodom and Gomorrah in 20th century America. But the militant promiscuity that emerged with the Gay Power movement in the 1970s is now under scrutiny by homosexuals themselves.

Those who still see their promiscuity as a kind of revolutionary sexual brotherhood dismiss the cautious as "erotophobes," but genuine fears for health have put them on the defensive.

The intriguing thing about this case is that since the victim stopped sleeping around, his doctor reports a steady improvement in his immune system cell count. The problem is that the doctor still does not know why.

THE GUARDIAN

US blood products face ban in Aids scare

By Andrew Veltech,
Medical Correspondent

Bans on imported American blood products and on blood donations by British homosexuals were being considered at the weekend after a report that Aids, the disease which has killed homosexuals, is being spread by infected blood through Britain and the Continent.

Thousands of people, including babies and haemophiliacs, could be at risk from transfusions contaminated by what is thought to be an Aids virus. Some transfusion experts are believed to be recommending that present stocks of American blood products should be scrapped, and replaced by supplies from the Continent. Britain imports most of its Factor VIII, a blood-clotting agent needed by the country's 4,500 haemophiliacs, from the United States.

Two British haemophiliacs are reported to have developed Aids (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) after being given Factor VIII. A third case, involving a non-homosexual, non-haemophiliac man who died recently from the Aids-related cancer, Kaposi's Sarcoma, is under suspicion.

Three haemophiliacs in Spain have developed Aids after receiving Factor VIII, and doctors from Seville, who report the cases in this week's Lancet, warn against using transfusions from homosexuals. They report that a nine-year-old boy has died, a 16-year-old boy is severely ill.

In the United States, 11 cases of Aids in haemophiliacs given Factor VIII have been reported to national centres for disease control.

The Aids agent in donated blood is not killed by routine irradiation, and is not identifiable in conventional tests. The blood donor may not even know that he is carrying the disease, and it may not develop in the recipient until months after the transfusion.

It appears to affect blood cells called T lymphocytes, depressing the victim's resistance to infection.

More than 1,350 Americans are known to have contracted the disease, and its rate of attack is growing rapidly among homosexuals. Haitian refugees to the US, and intravenous drug users also seem to be prime candidates. Women, too, have been infected. In Britain 14 cases have been officially recorded, including five deaths, but the true number of cases is thought to be nearer 100.

Disease undetected, page 4

1373

2452