

21st May, 1987

AIDS: THE DOCTOR'S DUTY TOWARDS PATIENTS

The Standards Committee of the General Medical Council are engaged in considering the ethical implications of the control and management of AIDS. In particular, they are considering in detail the problems which arise in this context in connection with confidentiality. The Committee have meanwhile drawn to the Council's attention their concern at recent reports that a few doctors may have been refusing to accept for treatment patients who are HIV positive or are suffering from AIDS.

At its meeting on 21st May, 1987, the Council stated its view on this matter in the following terms:

"The Council is seriously concerned at recent reports that, in a small number of cases, doctors have refused to provide patients who are HIV positive, or are suffering from AIDS, with necessary care and treatment. The Council expects that the profession will extend to such patients the same high standard of medical care and support which they would offer to any other patient.

It is entirely proper for a doctor who has a conscientious objection to undertaking a particular course of treatment, or who lacks the necessary knowledge, skill or facilities to provide appropriate investigation or treatment for a patient, to refer that patient to a professional colleague.

However, it is unethical for a registered medical practitioner to refuse treatment, or investigation for which there are appropriate facilities, on the ground that the patient suffers, or may suffer, from a condition which could expose the doctor to personal risk. It is equally unethical for a doctor to withhold treatment from any patient on the basis of a moral judgment that the patient's activities or lifestyle might have contributed to the condition for which treatment was being sought. Unethical behaviour of this kind may raise a question of serious professional misconduct."