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SUNDAY TIMES

Even the police are joining panic over mystery sex disease

22

THE homosexual men sitting in a New York coffee shop all look young, healthy and fit, but they are talking about blood-clots, lymph nodes and unspellable medical complications. It is hard to conceive that a good many of them will soon die. They are discussing the mysterious disease called Aids (acquired immunity deficiency syndrome). They all suffer from it - and they know it has already hit 1,450 people in America and killed 558 of them.

The disease, which breaks down the body's immune system, has become "America's No. 1 health priority", according to one senior health official. No one yet knows the cause or the cure. When it first reached America three years ago, it struck male homosexuals - particularly promiscuous ones - Haitians, haemophiliacs and drug addicts. There is now a fear that it might jump into the "straight" population. With that fear has come vastly increased research money and something akin to panic.

Several disturbing facts have been revealed by recent research: Aids sufferers can transmit the disease to sexual partners who are not in the usual risk groups; there has been at least one confirmed case of a patient dying from an Aids-contaminated blood transfusion; at least 20 babies born to mothers who are intravenous drug-users appear to have developed Aids.

Some very understandable fears are now being blown up into something more. A conservative columnist ended his column recently: "The poor homosexuals - they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution."

In the prisons of New York City, where there have been two deaths this year from Aids, the guards have worn

USA Will Ellsworth-Jones and John Barnes on dismay among gays

the right to wear gloves and even masks in some areas, although there is no evidence at all that Aids can be transmitted by touch.

The head of the guards' union in New York says his men are frightened by the disease. He told one reporter: "This is a plague tantamount to the bubonic plague of the dark ages."

In San Francisco the police department has issued its officers plastic masks and rubber gloves to wear when dealing with Aids victims. But the city's health director says: "There's been too much misinformation. Some people have been led to believe that you can get Aids by sitting on a bus or going into a restaurant."

GRO-A, a 31-year-old Aids patient who is co-chairman of the Aids support groups in New York, says: "There's been talk of quarantine. Well, to me quarantine is a nice word for a leper colony or concentration camp."

Members of the support group, after their meeting in the coffee shop, crack obvious feeble jokes: "Do you dare sit down with me?" says one. Another shakes hands and says, "You've probably caught it now." But this cannot conceal the awfulness of their predicament. They are dying yet they are the butt of bad jokes. They look to other homosexuals for help and are often shunned.

GRO-A says: "A friend with Aids in hospital wasn't washed for two weeks because nobody wanted to touch him." Is he really sure of that? "I'm fairly certain, but he's dead now so I can't ask him."

"There is such a feeling of isolation, such a desperation to find out you are

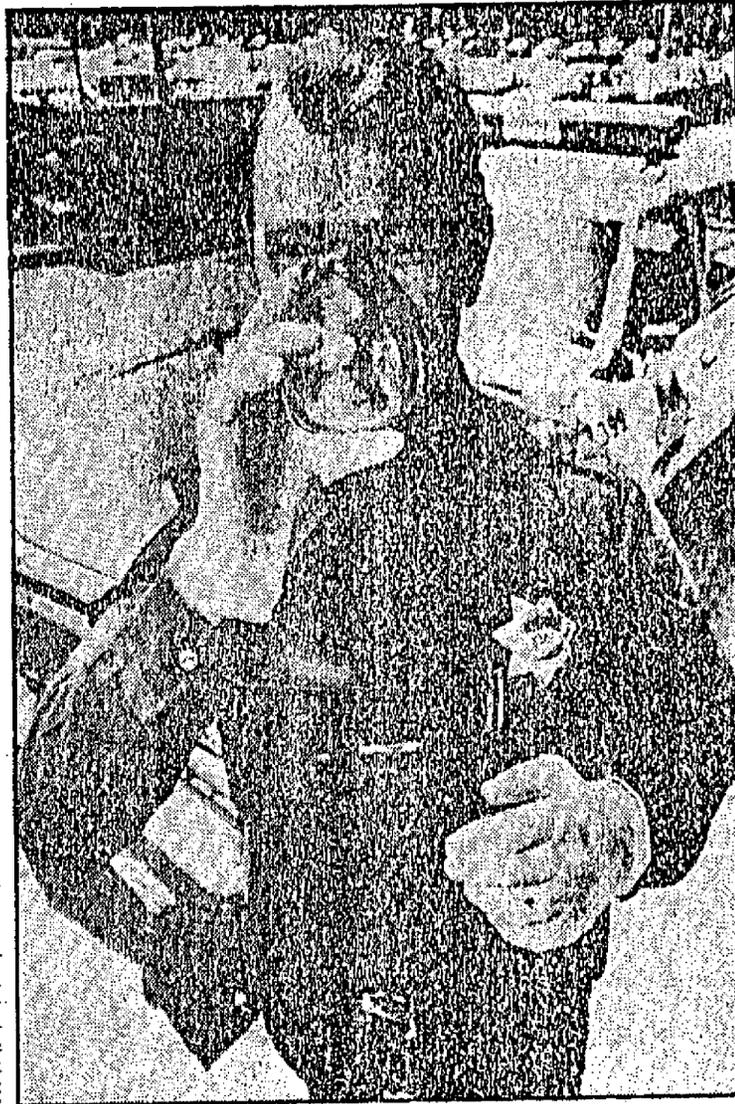
not the only one. We came out of the closet to admit we are gay and now we have to come out of the closet again to admit we have Aids." This man told a committee of state senators: "At the age of 28 I wake up every morning to face the very real possibility of my own death." Before testifying he had to produce a letter from his doctor to reassure the senators that they would not catch the disease.

They all suffer from the widespread fear of contagion by touch. One says: "I have four nieces. I adore them but I don't know if I should go near them. To start with, I didn't dare even hug my mother."

GRO-A was diagnosed an Aids sufferer a year ago, when he saw his doctor about swollen lymph glands and a persistent fever. "All my blood counts are dropping," he says. "They are dropping now two points every month. I am as weak as I ever have been." He does not look ill. "A lot of us don't. Not until the last. Then you look as though you are in Auschwitz."

● In Britain, the number of officially confirmed victims has reached 12 and there has been one known death. The lifestyle of gay men in London and other cities differs from that of their counterparts in San Francisco and New York - there is less extreme promiscuity and little multiple drug use, both believed to be factors in the spread of Aids - and so there are not the same fears of an epidemic.

According to Mike Rhodes of London Gay Switchboard, a homosexual information service, adequately funded research is vital, and physicians should be aware of the symptoms and alert to the fact that heterosexuals are also at risk. He says: "The belief that it is a 'gay plague' could lead to straight sufferers going undiagnosed."



Cover-up: policeman with mask and gloves for dealing with Aids victims

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