

The Discovery of AIDS

In early 1980 a young gay man in New York City contracted an unusual illness that defied diagnosis. Upon his death an autopsy revealed that he had suffered from toxoplasmosis, a disease caused by cell-invading parasites. Joel Weisman, a Los Angeles doctor, noticed that a number of his patients -- all homosexuals -- were suffering from an illness he diagnosed as cytomegalovirus (CMV). Five suspicious cases of pneumocystis in Los Angeles were reported to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, a federally funded research facility monitoring disease patterns. In the summer of 1981, physicians in New York City found 26 gay patients suffering from Kaposi's sarcoma, a rare form of skin cancer. Normally, these were treatable afflictions, but in each case the patient's immune system was abnormally, mysteriously, suppressed. By the end of the summer the CDC was aware of 70 more cases of Kaposi's and pneumocystis in New York and California. The victims were young, white, gay males, and 40 percent of them had died. The CDC announced that the "fact that these patients were all homosexuals suggests an association between some aspect of a homosexual lifestyle" and the disease. Was there a new infectious killer disease sweeping through the gay population? The gay community vigorously resisted such an idea.

Financially strapped by federal budget cuts, the CDC allocated only \$2 million in 1982 to organize a task force that would investigate this lethal medical mystery. While some referred to the syndrome as GRID (gay related immunodeficiency), it was AIDS -- acquired immune-deficiency syndrome -- that became the widely-accepted name. In 1982 it became apparent that the disease was not confined to the gay population. It seemed, as one DCD researcher indelicately put it, that AIDS sufferers belonged to a "4-H Club" -- Haitians, hookers, heroin users and homosexuals. Of the Haitians diagnosed with AIDS, a minority admitted to being gay; but a study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that many of the victims came from a district notorious for male and female prostitution, and suggested that many of the Haitian AIDS victims may have lied about homosexual encounters. Such was the level of fear inspired by this new illness that tourism, vital to the Haitian economy, dropped dramatically. As Port au Prince had been a favorite vacation spot for American gays, the Haitian government blamed them for introducing AIDS into the country. By 1985 it was estimated that nearly 60 percent of New York City junkies had been exposed to AIDS, as had one-third of all prostitutes, principally (it was suggested) because they were junkies themselves or had had sexual relations with bisexual men. The proportion of AIDS

patients who were gay remained a fairly constant 75 percent, and a few religious leaders went so far as to say that perhaps the syndrome was God's way of punishing homosexuals. And in 1982 news spread that AIDS could be transmitted through blood transfusions. In a matter of weeks blood bank donations declined 25 percent. The case of Ryan White, an Indiana youth who contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion and was banned from attending school, received national coverage. In Florida, the home of three boys afflicted by the virus (through transfusions) was burned to the ground.

Researchers at the Pasteur Institute in Paris announced in 1984 that a retrovirus called LAV, lymphadenopathy-associated virus, found in the blood of 90 percent of AIDS patients, caused the syndrome. At the same time Dr. Robert Gallo of the National Institute of Health reported that a new virus, HTLV-3 -- an antibody present in 89 percent of AIDS victims, was the cause. Genetic code research showed that LAV and HTLV-3 were the same virus, eventually identified as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). Spread through blood and other bodily fluids, HIV affected the body's ability to produce enough antibodies to fight infection, rendering the victim susceptible to various life-threatening diseases. Since the virus spread slowly, five to ten years could pass before the victim contracted AIDS -- the stage when serious infections began. An AIDS blood test became available in early 1985, and 11 million kits were sold in five months. Unfortunately, the kits produced erroneous positive results at least 25 percent of the time. In spite of all the knowledge gained about the HIV virus, irrational fears persisted, leading some to suggest a quarantine of suspected carriers. More reasonable steps were taken; New York's Mario Cuomo sought to close gay bathhouses and the Department of Defense resolved to test all 2.1 million members of the military, promising not to automatically discharge any servicemen who admitted to homosexual activity.

An anti-AIDS drug, AZT, came on the market in 1987. Developed in 1964, the drug was discovered to prolong the lives of AIDS victims by Dr. Samuel Broder of the National Cancer Institute. But many felt the Food and Drug Administration was acting too slowly in approving experimental drugs for AIDS treatment. The White House was criticized for a perceived indifference to the AIDS epidemic. Gay groups demonstrated in Washington and unveiled a memorial quilt containing the names of 2,000 AIDS victims. Congress consistently felt that the administration's requests for AIDS-earmarked funding were too low, and granted the Public Health Service nearly twice as much for research and public education. Some administration officials blasted Surgeon General C. Everett Koop for being too outspoken in his advocacy of condom use as well as AIDS and sex education in schools. The

Conservative Digest described Koop's approach as "toleration of perversion." Education Secretary William Bennett called for mandatory AIDS testing for hospital patients, prison inmates, immigrants and marriage license applicants and attacked state laws that made AIDS diagnoses confidential. Critics argued that confidentiality protected AIDS victims from discrimination and social ostracism. At issue were the rights of individuals versus the welfare of the community as a whole. In June 1987 an unanimous Senate approved compulsory testing of immigrants. By that time estimates put the number of people carrying the HIV virus at five to ten million worldwide, with over one million in the United States, 25,000 of whom had died. Without doubt the advent of AIDS caused many Americans to drastically alter their sexual behavior to reduce the risk of contracting the syndrome.