

THE OBSERVER

THE EPIDEMIC SPREADS

AIDS, America's newest and deadliest epidemic, at first dismissively dubbed 'The Gay Plague' because the majority of victims were homosexual, is defying all attempts at control. Media attention, sporadic when the disease was confined to homosexuals, is now in top gear, and for once the less deadly but highly publicised herpes is taking a back seat.

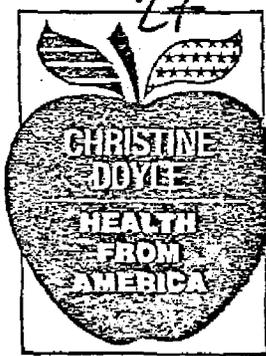
More than 1,350 Americans have already been diagnosed as suffering from AIDS — Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome — which destroys the body's natural resistance to disease, leaving it vulnerable to repeated attacks from infections and cancers which can prove fatal.

Despite recent experimental treatments, no cure has been found, and what is most frightening for sufferers, and frustrating for those trying to halt the spread of the disease, is the knowledge that AIDS can incubate in the body for anything up to three years before symptoms of a disease appear. Thus thousands of people may be unwitting carriers.

Public health officials at the US Centre for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, who have been tracking the epidemic since its first appearance among homosexuals in San Francisco and New York in 1979, are pessimistic: 'AIDS is doubling at a fairly regular rate,' said one. The latest suspected victims are babies, and adults who do not fall into any of the identified 'high risk' categories, and officials now predict a steady 'second wave' of the disease, spreading to other groups in the community.

The current death toll of around 38 per cent is described as 'a deceptive underestimate.' Already 70 per cent of those diagnosed in 1981 are dead, and this proportion may rise over the coming year.

'Fast track'
sexual activity



Increasingly the disease is being reported from other countries, notably Canada and Haiti (Haiti is a popular 'gay' holiday resort). Recently, more European sufferers have been diagnosed. The first French victims were diagnosed at the same time as the earliest American ones: there have now been 29 confirmed French cases—13 are dead—with 12 more under investigation. Doctors know of six cases among homosexual men in Britain.

About seven out of every 10 AIDS sufferers are homosexual, and the 'fast track' sexual activity of the urban American gay is a prime factor in transmission: those most at risk have an average of 61 sexual partners a year, according to one of many surveys.

However, incidence of the disease over the past 18 months among 200 drug abusers and 11 haemophiliacs, has strengthened suspicions that AIDS could also be passed on through blood — either via

infected needles or through blood products, such as those used by haemophiliacs, to prevent bleeding, which may contain blood pooled from up to 1,000 donors.

One 59-year-old haemophiliac, who received frequent injections with a blood product known as 'Factor VIII,' suffered from acute weight loss, swollen glands, ulcers and severe 'thrush' infection in his mouth and throat, all of which can be early signs of AIDS. He soon developed a severe and rare parasitic pneumonia, coupled with a viral infection, and died some six weeks later. Tests showed the severe immune damage, now known to be characteristic of AIDS.

This suspected connection with blood donation—a huge commercial undertaking in the United States with people selling rather than 'giving' their blood—led to wide public debate as to how the blood supply could be kept safe. If a haemophiliac could become infected, why not any one of the two or three million Americans who receive blood each year?

The blood theory gained credibility a few months ago when a San Franciscan baby boy, who received massive blood transfusions shortly after birth, began to show early signs of AIDS four months later. These were rapidly followed by a succession of severe bacterial illnesses. The baby fell into no known risk category: his parents were not homosexual, bisexual, drug abusers or Haitian, unlike the parents of some 20 other affected children.

Eventually, after tracing 19 blood donors who contributed to the baby's transfusions, health officials found one donor with diagnosed AIDS, who had apparently been in good health at the time of giving blood. To date, this is the only confirmed certain link between a blood donor and an AIDS victim. But the Atlanta doctors believe they have clear evidence of such a link in perhaps five other children.

Similar explanations are now being offered for the presence of AIDS in up to six adults who received blood during such operations as coronary bypass. Some public health officials now ask doctors to suggest that patients about to undergo surgery donate some of their own blood in advance as a precaution.

Unwilling to stigmatise an already harassed minority, the US Government has not yet advocated a ban on blood

donation by homosexuals, who traditionally have been a plentiful and welcome source of blood. The National Haemophilia Foundation, however, believes this must be the next step.

Meanwhile, to the astonishment of some officials, the government view, as put by a Food and Drug Administration spokesman, is: 'There is no clear-cut evidence to show that AIDS can be transmitted through blood transfusion.' An Atlanta health official commented: 'One of our problems here is that we are looking into the future with a much clearer glass than those who have not worked intimately with this disease. . . . The blood bank community is new to this epidemic and they are so frightened by the potential that they wish to minimise its impact. The heterosexual threat is only just beginning, though it may have been maturing in blood donated perhaps two or more years ago.'

Research into cause of AIDS

Millions of dollars are now being spent on research into the cause of AIDS—still not enough, given the gravity of the epidemic, according to some politicians and scientists. Samples of tissues and blood collected from around America and the world, and from research monkeys — also among the most recent victims — have yielded few clues, though researchers are now convinced an infecting 'virus' of some sort is responsible.

The cancer link is being pursued vigorously. At the

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