AIDS education urged by state health official

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LAFAYETTE — With no vaccine available, education remains the best way of slowing the spread of the deadly AIDS virus, the state's epidemiologist told health and physical-education teachers here Friday.

Dr. Louise McFarland said during a convention of the Louisiana Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance that teachers could tell high-school seniors and college freshmen about how AIDS is transmitted.

But some teachers said they are prevented from teaching students about sexually transmitted diseases because school administrators and school boards are squeamish about allowing sex-related information to be given to students.

"I got into a world of trouble," said one high-school teacher who said he tried to teach students about herpes.

McFarland said everyone must become responsible about their sexuality to prevent exposure to the AIDS virus.

"We talk about the sexual revolution. If it's not over now it should be," she said.

About three-fourths of the AIDS cases are contracted by homosexual and bisexual males, she said. But heterosexuals who have a large number of partners are at high risk also, she warned.

Evidence has surfaced that the disease can be transmitted by women, she said, and men who have encounters with prostitutes should consider themselves in a high-risk group.

McFarland said persons who want to be tested to see if they have been exposed to AIDS can be checked at health centers where individuals are tested for venereal diseases. The health centers also provide information about AIDS to inform individuals about safe sex.

Testing is being conducted at blood donation centers, but that analysis is intended to ensure a safe blood supply and not as a testing service for individuals to learn if they have been exposed to AIDS, she said.

She said she counsels gay men in New Orleans on the threat of AIDS. While many listen to the information, she said, some gays aren't overly concerned.

"They say 'I've got to die from something, and I'll go ahead and have a good time,'" she told the group.

The Louisiana Education Department is expected to adopt the AIDS guidelines set by the Center for Disease Control for schoolchildren with AIDS, McFarland said.

The CDC has determined that most children stricken with AIDS can remain in school, although each case should be considered individually, she said.

"No one is going to get this disease by sitting in the classroom or by using the same bathroom," she said.

The AIDS virus is a fragile organism that dies readily, especially when exposed to heat, she said. Solutions with bleach easily kill the virus, she said.

A person usually dies 10 to 11 months after the first AIDS symptoms are noticed, she said.

AIDS also has been contracted from blood transfusions, she said.

She said a man in Louisiana who received transfusion seven years ago during heart surgery has developed AIDS.