AIDS may be epidemic of the century

BY SHIRLEY BENTON
Advocate consumer writer

AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, is the most serious health problem seen in many years, probably in this century, says the chief state epidemiologist, Dr. Louise McFarland of New Orleans.

While it has not yet reached the epidemic proportion of influenza in the 1940s or polio in the 1950s, public health experts expect that by 1991 the number of AIDS cases will surpass both those diseases with an estimated 270,000 cases.

Once thought of as a problem of homosexuals, bisexuals and intravenous drug users, AIDS is seen increasingly in heterosexuals every month, McFarland says. Her office is part of the Office of Preventive and Public Health Services of the Department of Health and Human Resources. Louisiana has set up a trust fund to conduct research and educate the public about the disease.

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A portion or all of state income tax refunds can be designated for the trust fund by checking line 5D on the Louisiana income tax form or donations can be sent to P.O. Box 60468, New Orleans, La. 70180.

McFarland chairs the trust fund board with Dr. Ted Visniewski of New Orleans. Alesia M. Williams of New Orleans is secretary-treasurer; Rep. Alphonso Jackson, D-Shreveport, sponsor of the legislation setting up the fund, is a board member. Other board members are Dr. Joyce Mathison, state epidemiologist, New Orleans; E. Jeanne Johnson, Tulane Medical School pediatrics department, New Orleans; Dr. Sheila Lyle Moore and Helen S. Starnwood, New Orleans.

A Senator representative is yet to be named.

"Within the next two weeks, the board will get to work to determine what needs to be done, how monies will be used," McFarland says.

"People in the high-risk groups should be most concerned about giving," she says. "However, everyone should be concerned if they are sexually active or an IV drug user."

AIDS has taken 211 lives in the state, 67 percent of the 331 reported cases. Twenty-one cases have been reported in East Baton Rouge Parish.

How accurate that count is is unknown. We only know of those that are reported to us by physicians or hospitals, which are required to report. But all do not report cases, and we do not have any way to take them to court. We have to depend on them to do it. There is some number of cases that we do not know about. What percentage that is we don't know.

"They have not been reported because of the social stigma attached to having AIDS. If a homosexual, bisexual or IV drug user dies of AIDS, the family says 'Please don't put that on the death certificate' and the doctor may do that," McFarland says.

The state has no money for research into a possible cure and for educating citizens on how the disease is spread. Patients are being cared for, she says.

"Since we do not have a vaccine or cure . . . the only thing we can do is educate persons as to the rapid spread of this disease," McFarland says.

Two important preventive measures, she says, are:

* Homosexuals and homosexuals must know who their sexual partners are and who their partners' partners are.
* Intravenous drug users must use sterile needles, and never use anyone else's needle.

Five cases of AIDS have been reported in Louisiana children, who contracted the disease from their mothers before or during birth or through blood transfusions or are hemophiliacs.
AIDS is characterized by irreversible loss of natural immunity against disease, leaving victims vulnerable to illnesses which would not be a threat to anyone whose immune system is functionally normal.

For all intents and purposes our blood supply is safe," she says. She emphasizes there is no danger in blood from the Louisiana State Health Department or the New Orleans AIDS Task Force.

Information can be obtained from the New Orleans AIDS Unit in New Orleans, the site of the majority of Louisiana AIDS cases, or the New Orleans AIDS Task Force, Department of Health and Human Services.

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