La. unprepared for students with AIDS

By GUY COATES
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Louisiana has no plan on how to deal with students who contract AIDS because the disease is so new and too many questions need to be answered, officials said Wednesday.

Their comments came in the wake of a decision by officials in Kokomo, Ind., to bar a 13-year-old AIDS victim from school.

The boy, a hemophiliac, contracted the disease through blood transfusions.

Officials in Indiana said they would be forced by state guidelines to hire a special teacher familiar with the disease and that the school system was unable to cope with the problem.

"We have several children involved (who have AIDS) but they have all been infants," said Gwen Bach-Stewart, spokeswoman for the Louisiana Department of Health and Human Resources. "Their mothers have been drug users."

Asked about possible guidelines, she said:

"We're looking at a lot of different things. But, at this point, we don't have a definite plan. We're looking at so many aspects of what could happen. There's so much we don't know. As the problem grows, so does the reality of having to come up with a plan. We're sort of working in the dark right now."

She said her department would be the decision maker as to guidelines concerning students but would work in conjunction with the Louisiana Department of Education and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Jim Soileau, director of the BESE board, said he agreed that DHHR would be the lead agency in any decision making but BESE would cooperate and offer assistance in drafting guidelines.

Something should be done, he said, adding, "maybe this (the Indiana case) will prompt us to begin moving."

Louisiana has had a total of 127 reported cases going back to 1975.

Although physicians have only known about AIDS for a couple of years, "some physicians have gone back in their records and said, 'this is what that particular patient had,'" said Bach-Stewart.

One case was reported in each of three years — 1975, 1979 and 1981 with seven reported in 1982. In 1983 the number jumped to 17 and in 1984, to 67.

So far this year, 33 cases have been reported, she said.

Of the 127 AIDS victims, 65 have died.

AIDS breaks down the body's immune system. It is most likely to strike homosexuals, abusers of injectable drugs and hemophiliacs. It is apparently spread by sexual contact, contaminated needles and blood transfusions.

Those suffering from hemophilia, a condition that prevents blood from clotting normally, require transfusions from a variety of blood donors.