Hospitals learn to adjust to AIDS

by Eve E. Dawkins
Staff Writer

According to Julie Escott, Infection Control Coordinator at Lafayette General Hospital, Lafayette's hospitals are adjusting to dealing with the AIDS crisis. Including patients from surrounding areas, Lafayette's hospitals have treated about 30 to 40 AIDS patients.

She said, "The nurses treat the AIDS patients just as they have always treated patients who have hepatitis B, because the diseases are very similar in that they are both viral and can be transmitted in the blood and body fluids of the patients.

The health-care workers wear gloves during any contact with blood or body fluids. In fact, many hospitals in the metropolitan area have taken the same precautions in dealing with all patients. Escott said that because of the nature of the disease, people can be infected and have no symptoms. We've had some come in not knowing what they had, not even suspecting and then getting that diagnosis once they're here, she added. Escott said that even the AIDS test is only about 80 to 80 percent accurate. She explained, "It doesn't measure the virus itself, but looks for a substance called an antibody."

She continued, "An antibody is a chemical we produce in response to recognize something foreign that is trying to infect us and the antibody actually protects us from infection."

In Lafayette, for people who wish to be tested for AIDS, there is the public health unit on the corner of Jefferson and Pinhook. Testing is done anonymously, but there is mandatory counseling required on the results.

By this process, the AIDS virus literally breaks down the immune system and its ability to fight disease. From that point there are several possibilities for an AIDS infected individual. Some may remain healthy but still are able to spread the disease are called Asymptomatic. Another group, who develop symptoms that are less severe than those commonly associated with AIDS have an AIDS-Related Complex (ARC).

Gona (a form of skin cancer), could be ordinarily resisted by a healthy immune system, but in an AIDS patient, it can critically infect.

Although the mechanics of the virus can be devastating, the AIDS virus itself is not very strong on it's own, it's the blood or body fluids that can be infected.

Sarcoma (a form of skin cancer), could be ordinarily resisted by a healthy immune system, but in an AIDS patient, it can critically infect.

The disease can not be transmitted through casual contact. It is this misconception that has caused many AIDS patients to be mistreated by ill-informed people.

All rights of AIDS patients are now protected by the law. According to Jack Armstrong, a professor at LSU Law Center, people with AIDS are now entitled to handicapped programs, and therefore protected from discrimination.

An individual with AIDS legally cannot be denied the benefits of any program, institution or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

Also, no employer or housing can be refused to someone because they have AIDS.

Some AIDS patients in spite of their debilitating circumstances are concentrating on living positively. Bobby Baxter, an AIDS outpatient who spoke at the conference, expressed an optimistic attitude about some of the changes in his life.

He said, "I feel like as a result of being diagnosed with AIDS, I've been able to get out of myself a lot more and give of myself."

He continued, "I started looking at priorities, what really matters, and who my friends were.

Baxter also expressed his admiration of the gay community's efforts in the AIDS crisis.

He said, "I've seen the gay community take responsibility for their community, and not just accept it."

Counselor Viki Word discusses information about AIDS with an interested person at the workshop.

Photo by Vicky Singh