

Speaker stresses dangers of AIDS to group

By TONYA V. SMITH
Chronicle Staff Writer

AIDS is running rampant in the Afro-American community and if the race is not sufficiently educated and warned about the fatal disease thousands will die, said Dr. Richard P. Keeling, president of the American College Health Association.

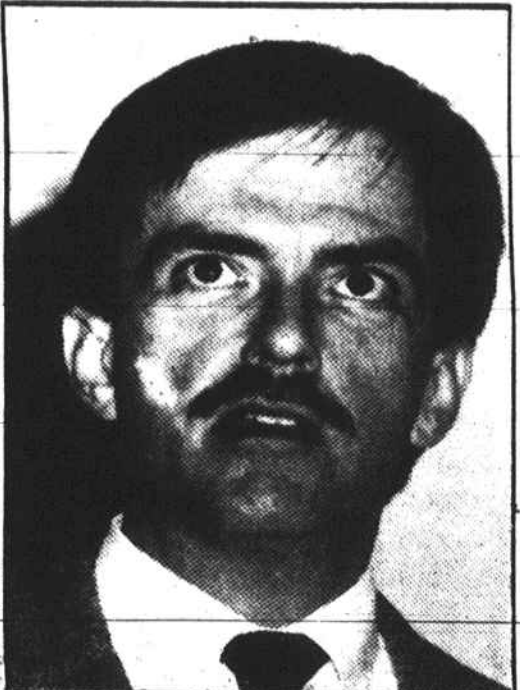
Keeling spoke to about 150 students, teachers and staff members at Wake Forest University last week as part of the institution's AIDS Awareness Day.

"The issue of AIDS in minority communities in this country has got to be addressed, particularly at the urban level," Keeling said. "The fact is that the frequency of AIDS among people in the black race is about twice of what it would be expected to be given their frequency in the population."

Afro-Americans make up about 11.5 percent of this country's population. About 26 percent of the nation's race has the human immunodeficiency virus, HIV, that causes AIDS, Keeling said.

"This overrepresentation occurs not because there's something about being Latin or black that causes AIDS, it's because of the connection to IV (intravenous) drug use, poverty and lack of access to medical services," Keeling said.

"A lot of people in black communities tend to look at this



as a white boy's disease, 'this is a gay man's disease', and that (mentality) is lethal among blacks in this country and it has got to be confronted."

The mindset has been difficult to confront because when whites try to tell Afro-Americans that the disease is also affecting them, Afro-Americans feel whites are trying to pin the origin of the disease on them, said Keeling.

"We have had a great deal of difficulty confronting this because for a long time people who've tried to address it were labeled racist," Keeling said. "We have had to, therefore, be very sensitive about it and the obvious way to deal with that is to have blacks educate blacks."

The most successful educational projects about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome have involved Afro-Americans teaching each other, Keeling said.

"In urban minority communities, particularly in South Florida, in some parts of Texas, in New York, and Philadelphia, this (AIDS) has the potential to run like wild fire through black communities. And if we don't do something, we're going to be facing potentially thousands and thousands of deaths among urban blacks."

Not only Afro-Americans, but all people have the "this can't happen to me syndrome" when the topic of AIDS comes up, Keeling told the audience as he presented a series of slides depicting AIDS' victims.

"This could not be my face," Keeling said while showing a pic-



Above, members of the audience listen in rapt attention as Dr. Richard P. Keeling, left photo, addresses participants in Wake Forest's AIDS Awareness Day.

Photos by Charmaine Delaverson

ture of an Afro-American woman with a sunken face and skeleton-like body. "This could not be my future. This intensive care unit, bed, ventilator, the IV line could not be connected to my body. I could not someday experience this pain. This could not be my loneliness, my isolation, my loss. This could not be the end of my plans. This could not be my family, my children, my spouse. It couldn't happen to me."

Because the majority of people are familiar with what Keeling called "AIDS 101" -- the basic facts and data about the disease, he declined to spend a lot of time rehashing what people already know.

"The outcome -- no matter what the clinical disease caused by AIDS is -- the outcome is pretty predictable," said Keeling. "Mortality rates have been extraordinarily high. To average the amount from 1981 to the current day, they come out to 56 percent. That does not, however, suggest that 44 percent of people with AIDS will be long-term survivors."

Medical experts still expect for 99 percent or more of the people diagnosed with full-blown AIDS to die of the disease within an average of 27 months from the day of their diagnosis, at an average age of 34.2 years.

Unfortunately, the undergraduate student carrying the virus that causes AIDS doesn't act sick, feel sick or look sick until about eight years after contracting the disease, Keeling said.

"Although they can transmit the virus to somebody else, they're usually not identified, they usually don't realize they have it themselves," said Keeling. "So that makes this an invisible problem. The invisibility of AIDS, therefore, gets in the way of our trying to convince people to take it seriously."

Today there are about 82,500 college aged students with AIDS. That figure will jump to a quarter of a million in 1991 to half a million. By 1993 there will be 100,000 new cases of AIDS a year, and 100,000 deaths caused by AIDS annually.

"Which means that by 1993 -- which is about the time that some of you will have just finished college -- by 1993, we will in fact have the disease AIDS that will kill four times as many young people as drunk drivers, six times as many as murder, eight times as many as suicide, 20 times as many as leukemia, 50 times as many as brain tumors. By the time most of you are out of college AIDS will

be the most common cause of death," said Keeling.

Because members of the gay community are changing their sexual habits, the number of new AIDS cases in that segment of the population has dropped from 67 percent in September 1987 to 58 percent in September 1988. As of January 1989, that figure is at 54 percent, Keeling said.

AIDS cases among intravenous drug users is rising rapidly from 15.5 in 1987 percent to 23 percent last year. That figure has climbed to 25 percent this month. Transmission of AIDS among heterosexuals has increased from about 4 percent in 1987 to 4.5 percent in 1988, and is now at 5 percent.

Drug users must stop sharing needles, and heterosexuals must abstain or practice safe sex in order for the number of AIDS cases in those segments of the population to decrease, Keeling said.

Safe sex means getting to know your partner before engag-

ing in intercourse, using latex condoms coated in a spermicide and not mixing alcohol with sex, Keeling said.

He admitted it was easy for him to tell college students and others that they have to change their lifestyles to be safe from the AIDS virus, but that, he said, is tough to do.

"We should acknowledge that these changes are tough," Keeling said. "That acknowledgement doesn't mean we should give up. It means we should recognize, among other things, that there are some things that make it tough for people to change."

But in referring to a chart listing the rapid spreading of other sexually transmitted diseases -- gonorrhea, herpes, chlamydia -- Keeling said making changes has been tough all along.

"Ultimately, the only thing that will prevent HIV infection is self-esteem," Keeling said. "I can't stop you from developing AIDS, I can't stop you from being infected

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