

The nightmare that won't go away

Living with AIDS - the challenge of the 90s

As recently as a decade ago, it was widely believed that infectious disease was no longer much of a threat in the developed world . . . That confidence was shattered in the early 1980's by the advent of AIDS.

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AIDS, the dreaded collection of illnesses caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), may well be the most fiendish affliction of the 20th century.

It is estimated that over 90,000 people have AIDS in the United States. By 1991, an estimated 300,000 people will be diagnosed with AIDS. And in both instances, 99.9 percent will die, projects Dr. Suzy Fletcher.

Fletcher, professor and chairperson of the graduate program in the School of Nursing at Indiana State University, visited UNCW April 11 to discuss the responsibilities and challenges that AIDS presents to today's society.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, as it is formally known, damages the body's ability to fight off disease and leaves it open to attack from unusual types of cancer and ordinarily innocuous infections. It is a serious malfunction of the body's immune system.

HIV is known to be transmitted by infected semen and blood. This includes injection of infected blood or blood products through the sharing of unsterilized

hypodermic needles, or the transfusing of contaminated blood and blood products to hemophiliacs and other blood recipients. Perinatal transmission (infected mother to fetus), or transmission from mother to nursing baby also occurs. It is not clear whether AIDS can be transmitted through bodily excretions such as excrement and urine.

Fletcher pointed out that it is important to realize that HIV infection does not always cause AIDS. The consequences of infection can be mild, severe, or somewhere in between, with AIDS being the most severe manifestation. *The majority of people infected with HIV do not develop symptoms or come down with AIDS.* These people remain asymptomatic. Others have developed the milder, not usually fatal illness called AIDS-Related Complex (ARC).

Battling Ignorance

Education is essential to understanding and preventing AIDS, Fletcher said. "Do not practice risky behavior," she urged. Safe sex, including the use of condoms and spermicides, and abstinence from drugs and alcohol in potentially intimate situations is crucial. "Drinking too much alcohol can cause you to have sex with people you ordinarily wouldn't even talk to!" she said.

Education is also crucial to dispelling the myths about the transmission of AIDS. For instance, HIV, the virus causing AIDS, is much more fragile than cold or flu viruses. Heat, soap and water, household bleach solutions, and the chlo-



Suzy Fletcher, RN, DNS, professor and chairperson of the graduate program in the School of Nursing at Indiana State University.

rine used in swimming pools kill the HIV virus, according to "The Essential AIDS Fact Book" by Paul Harding Douglas and Laura Pinsky.

Fear and ignorance about AIDS distort the facts and impede the development of appropriate and effective control measures. The United States Public Health Service states, "AIDS is a blood-borne or sexually transmitted disease that is not spread by casual contact." The Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences states that AIDS cannot be transmitted through casual contact such as

sharing an office with someone, or shaking hands with an AIDS patient. Furthermore, the virus does not "live" on drinking fountains, toilet seats, or other inanimate objects.

Additionally, there is no evidence that exchange of saliva transmits the virus, even in prolonged deep kissing. No cases of AIDS transmitted by kissing alone have been reported, according to Douglas and Pinsky.

Challenges

The issue of health care is an enormous one in coping with the AIDS pandemic, Fletcher said. The costs of providing medical treatment and resources are prohibitive. "From the point of diagnosis to the point of death, care for the average AIDS patient comes to \$50,000," said Leo Teachout, executive director of GROW/AIDS Resource Project in Wilmington. "People need to realize that the taxpayers end up paying for most of that."

And limited resources such as doctors, clinics, insurance, transportation to medical care facilities, counselors, and support groups compound the problem.

As difficult as it is to believe, Fletcher thinks there may be some good that results from the battle with AIDS. We're developing good community models of caring that will help other "victims," she said, such as the poor, the disabled, the homeless, the unemployed, the substance abusers, and the mentally ill.

Allison Relos

Speaker supports better nursing resources

Nurses take care of patients.

They are at the bedside of the patient 24 hours a day. They coordinate all of the things the health care workers do for the patient. They constantly assess the progress of the patient and have the ability to use good judgment and make decisions in regard to the patient's welfare.

Today's nurses have a strong advocate. She is Maureen Maguire, director of patient care services at the Medical University of South Carolina Medical Center in Charleston. Maguire visited UNCW recently to present a symposium, "Nursing Practice: The State of the Art."

"What I enjoy most about my job is that it gives me the opportunity to take care of nurses - to provide an environment that enables them to practice as professionals, she said.

"The greatest challenge we face today is changing people's perception of what we do and who we are," she continued. "Many people don't fully understand the heavy responsibility nurses have for patient care."

According to Maguire, much of what

nurses do is not physician driven. That is, there are many things that are initiated by nurses that are not directed by physician's orders. "Nurses need to be very intelligent and thoughtful," she said.

Improvements in nurses' working conditions are of primary importance to the profession. Maguire believes nurses need to be freed from transporting patients, housekeeping, filling water pitchers, and making beds to do the things they were trained for. RNs have a lot of knowledge about the total patient and assessing patient needs, said Maguire. This knowledge needs to be put to good use.

An increased demand in the supply of nurses has resulted in a nursing shortage, according to a 1987 report compiled by the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Otis R. Bowen, M.D. The report reveals that the shortage of RNs is contributing to the deterioration of RNs' work environment. As a result, this may be having a negative impact on the quality of patient care and access to health services.

The report recommends that the nurses' time and energy should go toward the direct care of patients. Health care organizations need to provide adequate staffing levels for clinical and non-clinical support services. Labor-saving technologies, such as automated information systems, need to be implemented also. And innovative staffing patterns need to be introduced that recognize and appropriately use the different levels of education, competence, and experience among all nursing personnel.

Salary compensation is another area of concern to nurses, according to Maguire. "Nurses need to be compensated throughout their careers," she said. "At the most, a nurse can increase her salary during her career by 30 percent. Compare that to CPAs who have the potential to increase their salaries by 150 percent."

A variety of career opportunities exist for nurses, said Maguire. They can work in hospitals, provide in-home care, work in hospices taking care of the terminally ill, or in case management, following a patient's progress



Maureen Maguire, RN, MSN, director of patient care services at the Medical University of South Carolina Medical Center in Charleston.

prior to admission through post discharge. They can choose a speciality such as geriatric nursing or pediatric nursing or may even opt to become nursing entrepreneurs, owning their own businesses.

Maguire highly recommends a career as a nurse. "This is a very exciting and valuable time to be in nursing," she said. "It is an extremely worthwhile profession. . . you never stop learning. In nursing, you always have the ability to grow as a human being."

Allison Relos