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Questions raised by 'sexual revolution'

Officials warned about transmissible viruses

By David Williamson

The "sexual revolution" among young people today involves a lot more than questions of freedom and morality, a specialist in infectious diseases said in a speech here last week.

Dr. David J. Lang, professor of pediatrics at Duke, said there is growing evidence that certain viruses can be sexually transmitted, and few young people are aware of the possible consequences.

Lang addressed the annual meeting of the Southern College Health Association, a group of physicians, nurses and administrators who operate student health services at colleges and universities throughout the Southeast.

Shot may not help

"I think the common notion is that if you get syphilis or gonorrhea you only have to go see your doctor or visit a public health clinic for a shot of penicillin, and then you are all right," he said.

"But virus infections do not respond to antibiotics the way bacterial infections do, and they may spread or persist unimpeded by any form of available treatment."

Lang, who is chief of the division of pediatric infectious diseases, said his own research has centered on cytomegalovirus (CMV), a virus he has shown to be present in the semen of some men. Previous researchers have found the virus in the genital tracts of some women.

Severe hazard to newborn infant

While these minute parasitic agents frequently cause no symptoms or go

unnoticed in adults, he said an infected newborn baby can suffer severe neurobiological damage leading to blindness, deafness or mental retardation.

Current estimates are that about one in every 100 American babies is born infected with CMV, and about two in every 1,000 infants are injured by it, he said.

"The risk of infection during any particular pregnancy is small, but if you look at the statistics in the country as a whole, prenatal CMV infections occur far more frequently than German measles (rubella) which has attracted considerable national attention," he said.

Patients whose immune systems have been depressed, either by illness or by drugs they must take, also are especially susceptible to CMV, Lang added.

Herpes simplex strain

Another untreatable infection scientists say can be spread by sexual contact is that caused by a strain of herpes simplex, the virus that is responsible for cold sores and fever blisters.

Herpes simplex can cause painful, recurring sores on or around the genitals in both males and females and lead to

secondary infections when the skin is broken, Lang said, and, like cytomegalovirus, it too can injure or kill newborn infants.

And while there is no proof yet that genital infection with herpes simplex is related to cervical cancer, statistically at least, women who have it are eight times more likely to develop that cancer, he said.

Risks yet to be defined

The specialist said sexually transmitted virus infections have not received widespread publicity because the risks have not been adequately defined.

"It's not reasonable to be an alarmist before you even know what the risks are," he explained. "This is a young field, and only a few laboratories anywhere in the world are looking at the potential problems."

Lang said researchers recognize that all these viruses can be spread by other means, and so he is not implying that everyone who contracts an infection is sexually promiscuous.

"I think there are some significant questions, however, and it's about time

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DR. DAVID J. LANG

You might see these students again some day

By John Becton

If the name tag attached to the navy blue jacket identifies the wearer as a "Health Careers Volunteer," you might

want to get to know the young person so attired.

In a few years, he or she might be your fellow staff member or even, in time, your personal physician.

The Health Careers Volunteer (HCV) Program provides Duke undergraduate health careers students with an opportunity for observation and experience with medical practitioners on a regularly scheduled basis.

More useful for both parties

Most participants do volunteer work three or four times a week in such areas as the emergency room, radiology, the pediatric playroom, physical therapy or hospital labs.

"There have always been undergraduates doing volunteer work in the hospital," according to Shirley Hanks, assistant to the advisor for health professions. "We are trying to make the experience more coherent and useful for both the students and the medical center."

This is the HCV Program's second semester. The 137 participants were assigned to specific shifts and locations at Duke, the VA or Durham County General Hospital. Fifty-four are at Duke.

Gives them a look

Participation during the fall semester was limited to students who have applied for Duke's Early Identification Program (EIP) which was established this fall to identify students for early admission to medical school.

The volunteer program gives students the opportunity "to take a look at the medical, nursing and allied health professions," Hanks said.

"They do a lot of observing and a lot of asking questions," she said. "Many have been pleased to discover they can stand the sight of blood."

Orientation for participants includes an introduction to hospital work in general, and specific training in their assigned work area.

"We emphasize that they should only do what they are trained to do," Hanks said.

The students' duties are ones which are permissible for volunteers and helpful to hospital personnel. The duties include transferring patients, transporting lab samples and supplies, holding children for injections, talking with patients, shaving patients and assisting in putting on casts.

Staying in touch

Volunteers receive a weekly HCV newsletter and are required to attend "HCV Hours" at least once a month. These sessions, offered at three different times each week, give the students a chance to discuss their experiences and provide a means of monitoring the effectiveness of the placements. Health professionals are available from time to time for consultation during Hours.

(EIP students were required to attend one group meeting and one approved lecture each week during the fall.)

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HE WORKS, SHE RECORDS—Student volunteer Cathy Clinton, records the measurements of a physical therapy patient's work output on the Cybex isokinetic machine. Clinton is one of 54 Duke undergraduates doing volunteer work in the medical center this spring. (Photos by Parker Herring)