

Charlotte Medical Community Is Not Standing "Idly By" In AIDS Research

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By Corrie Watkins
Special To The Post

What is AIDS?
How is AIDS transmitted?
Who is most likely to get AIDS?
These are some of the questions still being asked by the American people. Charlotte is no exception.

Other questions being asked by Charlotteans and others are where can I go to get help or be tested? Will anyone know that I have the virus? Will I die? How long do I have if my test is positive for the antibodies and the virus? Where did I get it? Can I give it to someone else? Can I lose my job? Can I be asked to leave my apartment? Do I have any legal rights? As new information is discovered, new questions are being asked.

AIDS is the abbreviation for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Scientists have identified that AIDS is caused by a retrovirus. This virus is not transmitted by casual contact.

Persons having the virus have a reduced ability to fight infection. They may experience swollen lymph nodes lasting more than one month, unexplained weight loss, night sweats, fever greater than 99 degrees F. for more than 10 days, persistent coughing and shortness of breath, persistent diarrhea, and Thrush (whitish spots in the mouth). The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta reported cases of Kaposi's sarcoma which is usually seen in older men of Mediterranean or Eastern European Jewish descent, but these cases reported were all young men. Another rare disease occurrence was the sighting of Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, a lung infection caused by a parasite. This disease was usually seen only in persons with cancer or transplant patients, yet all reported cases to the CDC were young, gay men. Kaposi's sarcoma can explain the symptom of blue spots on the skin or under the skin and mucous membranes, since this disease affects the blood vessel wall resulting in eruption of the vessel. These atypical cases helped researchers to define what is commonly known as the High Risk Group.

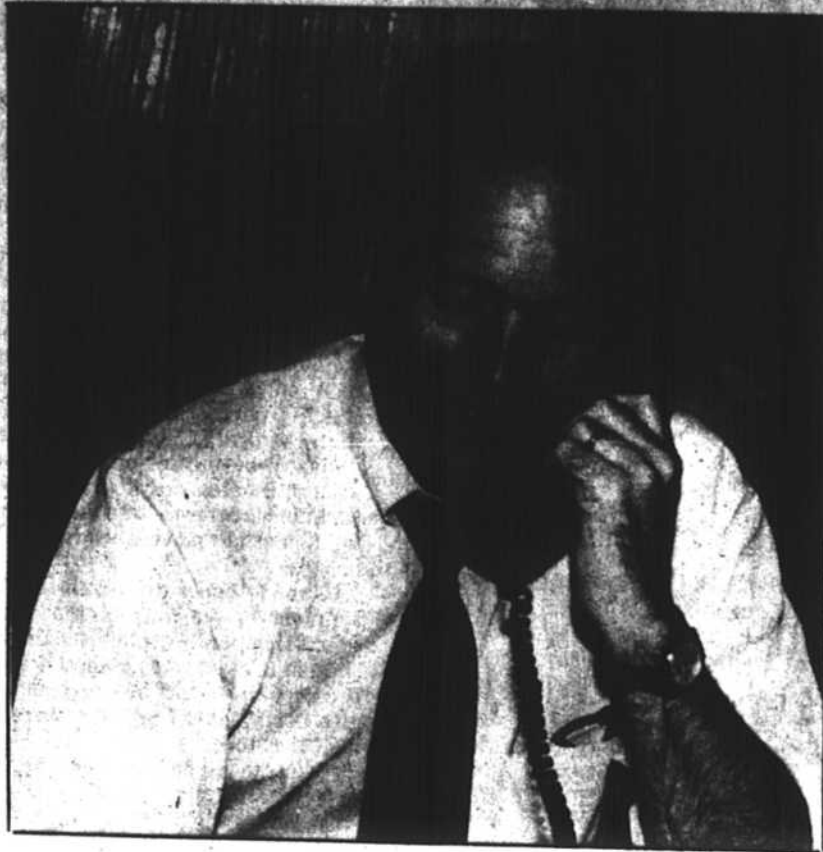
The High Risk Groups are homosexual or bisexual men, which makes up 73 percent of the cases reported to the CDC. Intravenous drug users make up 17 percent of reported cases. Hemophiliacs make up less than one percent of reported cases to the CDC since the first case was reported in 1981. Before that time there had been no reports of AIDS antibodies or AIDS virus. Researchers recommend that any male having had sex with another since 1979, prostitutes - male and female - and any sexual partners of persons in the above group are also considered High Risk Class.

Nearly 75 percent of those who have died had been diagnosed before 1983 as reported by the CDC. Two out of three of the children diagnosed and reported to the CDC have died.

Since the first reported case in 1981 there have been 10,533 new cases reported to the CDC. One hundred and twenty of these were children, who had contracted the virus from their parents. About 5,000 Americans AIDS victims have died. Most of them from diseases like Kaposi's sarcoma and pneumocystis carinii pneumonia. The CDC predicts reported cases to them will be 20,000 in a year. They also predict that 300,000 Americans will be exposed to the virus.

Researchers have found that AIDS virus in blood, semen, and saliva. The incubation period for the virus can range up to six years and in some cases even be longer. If a person was infected two years ago, symptoms may not yet be presenting themselves.

Charlotte medical community is not standing idly by and allowing the rest of the scientific community to do all the work on this dreaded virus. Dr. Joseph Jemsek with the Nalle Clinic with six years' experience in infectious diseases said, "Due to the nature of the AIDS problem there is a gravitation to this field." Recommended by other doctors in the



Dr. Steven Keener
.....Health Department director

Charlotte area were asked about the virus in general and its affect on Charlotte. Dr. Jemsek said that there was research being done in Charlotte before the first case presented itself 16 months ago. Charlotte is tied into the CDC, added Dr. Jemsek. He also stated, "Charlotte's medical community is using recommendations from the CDC and other research agencies." Dr. Jemsek feels that the scientific community was now slow in its response to the AIDS research but when it was seen as a "national threat," that appreciation was given. Dr. Jemsek expressed confidence in the facts that the medical community is not behind and there is a good supply of research ability and equipment available.

Dr. Jemsek said, when asked what is AIDS, "AIDS is a new disease. When we look at infectious diseases, we have to decide if this is a new disease or a variation of an old disease." He continued, "There is a great deal that we don't know yet." When asked about the HTLV III which is the abbreviation for Human T-cell Lymphotropic Virus, type III, a test for the antibodies, Dr. Jemsek said, "There are false positives, which is a positive test when in fact none exist."

When a person is infected by an infectious disease the body uses its built in ability to fight this infection - white blood cells usually begin the fight. This process produces substances called antibodies. These antibodies can therefore be used to indicate whether or not a person has been infected by a certain disease. In the case of the AIDS virus, once a person is infected by the virus, the body begins to produce antibodies to the HTLV III virus test. A negative antibody test does not guarantee that a person is free of the virus, especially if he or she is a member of a group which is considered high risk for AIDS.

Positive tests in blood and plasma may be caused by other things and that is why a followup medical exam is needed to insure a better interpretation of test results. One's doctor is in the best position to decide what additional tests, if any, should be done. It is important that one have as open and frank a discussion as possible regarding any possible exposures that you may have had to the virus. This will help one's physician to make the best evaluation possible. It is recommended by health officials that until one's doctor has completed a medical evaluation, that one practice caution and good judgment with sexual activity and IV drug users.

Health officials also recommend that persons who think that they have been infected or who have had

a positive HTLV III, not donate blood or plasma, sperm, body organs, or other tissues, limit sexual activity to one partner, no "french" kissing and oral sex, do not use other person's toothbrushes, razors or other implements that could become contaminated with blood, do not let others use needles that one has used if one is an IV drug user, and women with a positive antibody test or the virus would be advised to avoid pregnancy or to postpone pregnancy until more is learned or recommended by one's own doctor. Some infants have developed AIDS from their infected mothers.

Until recently, the antibody test was limited to use in research to gain a better understanding of AIDS as an infectious disease. During the past year, commercially available tests were recently approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). It must be stressed that the HTLV III is used for the identification of the antibodies only, not for AIDS itself.

The test is usually confidential because of the serious consequences of persons having to move out of their apartments or being fired off their jobs. In a recent interview with Charlotte's City Attorney Underhill, he said, "There are no laws that I know about to prevent an employer or a landlord from firing you or insisting that you move out of their apartment complex." Attorney Underhill did not express high optimism about any up and coming laws from North Carolina legisla-

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Henry Underhill
.....City attorney

tors. Attorney Underhill did say "that if the need arose which warranted legislation on the AIDS issue, Charlotte would send a delegation to Raleigh and request action."

Dr. Steven Keener, director of the Charlotte Health Department, said, "There are not any well documented remissions or cures as of yet." The United States Public Health Service has a toll-free hotline at 1-800-342-AIDS. The Health Department suggests that persons concerned about AIDS learn the facts about AIDS and actively seek new and correct information. They also say that not only the persons in the high risk group should take steps to prevent the spread of this virus, but every person has this responsibility also. Educate your family and friends by discussing new found facts with them is also a positive suggestion. Since 1981 there have been over 12,000 reported cases to the Health Department. Dr. Keener said, "Those persons who have already been tested for the HTLV III and are found to be positive should come to the Health Department for treatment. They need to contact their doctors for a complete evaluation."

"We at the Health Department are very interested in AIDS cases but

not those persons with a positive HTLV III. We would prefer that the only persons who should be reported to the Health Department are those with confirmed diagnoses. There are counseling sessions before the test is conducted and counseling once the test is HTLV III positive by the Health Department. Any persons wanting the test can get it done at the Health Department," said Dr. Keener.

There are designated alternate testing sites all over North Carolina and the country which offer this free testing for the HTLV III. Persons are free to go to their own doctors for this testing and do not have to come to the Health Department. The testing at the Health Department is done without the use of the person's name. The persons entering the Health Department are given a number after the test is explained. The results are only given back to the persons with corresponding numbers. Dr. Keener said, "The numbers are not reused; 399-2501 can be called to make an appointment for the test," he added. "There have been 58 tests done by the Charlotte Health Department, seven positive tests have been re-

ported to the Charlotte Health Department."

He added, "North Carolina has had 54 confirmed AIDS cases by the CDC and in Mecklenburg County nine confirmed cases. There have been six deaths reported in Mecklenburg County. The true deterrant of the spread of the AIDS virus will be in the cures, vaccine, responsible behavior on the part of everyone, which will cause a change in the trend of AIDS phenomena."

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Admission is free. All items sold will be handmade or home-baked. Follow I-77 to the Cornelius-Lake Norman Exit 28. The school is located on N.C. No. 73 West (Catawba Ave.).

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