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Spread of AIDS Is Spurred By Racism, U.S. Panel Says

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 11 — AIDS disproportionately afflicts minorities, and the disease has to be considered as a racial issue because its spread is spurred by discrimination, the National Commission on AIDS said today.

In a report to the White House, the advisory commission said that black and Hispanic Americans now accounted for 46 percent of the nation's AIDS cases and that dealing with the epidemic was being hampered by discrimination, poverty and the lack of health services.

The commission, which has one black and one Hispanic member among its 12 commissioners, said the battle against AIDS could be lost if prevention and treatment programs aimed at ethnic groups are not reinforced.

"As a nation we have no choice but to take account of race if we are to alter the course of the epidemic," the report said. Racial inequality "is pre-eminent among the festering social problems that H.I.V. highlights and upon which the epidemic feeds," it said. H.I.V. is the virus that causes AIDS.

A Necessary Risk?

Several commission members said at a briefing that to cope with the epidemic the ethnic nature of the disease in the United States needed to be emphasized, despite the risk that white people might start seeing AIDS as a minority disease that afflicted "other" people and not themselves.

Harlon L. Dalton, a professor at Yale Law School, said concern about the disease might wane as whites stopped identifying with those afflicted, much as the general public at first neglected AIDS because many felt that it affected only homosexuals.

"We cannot approach the AIDS problem in a color-blind fashion," Mr. Dalton, who is black, said in an interview. "Racism in this country enables people to not care for people who are not like them, so we are facing a dilemma in addressing the racial issue.

"I am terribly worried that once it is learned that the face of AIDS is darkening, broad public support may fade."

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome is an incurable viral disease that destroys the body's immune system, leaving patients vulnerable to a host of diseases that eventually kill. It is primarily spread through sexual contact, intravenous drug abuse involving shared needles and contact with infected blood.

Since the disease was identified in the early 1980's, 242,146 cases have been reported in this country and 158,243 people have died. An estimated one million Americans are believed infected with the AIDS virus. The main victims have been homosexual men and intravenous drug users.

Dr. Don C. Des Jarlais, a commission member who is with the Chemical Dependency Institute of Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, said that one-third of all AIDS cases were related to drug abuse but that the figure was much higher among some minorities.

"Injection drug use has played a significant role in the disproportionate impact of AIDS on African Americans and Hispanics-Latinos," the report said. "In these communities the proportion of AIDS cases attributable directly to injection drug use is four times that for whites," 40 percent as against 9 percent.

'Actually Getting Worse'

Dr. Des Jarlais said several commissions studying AIDS had recommended universal access to drug treatment programs on demand, yet in many cities addicts still were on waiting lists for treatment. "We are not in a position where things are improving," he said. "It is actually getting worse."

The report said that in 1990 and 1991 AIDS cases increased 11.5 percent among Hispanic people and 10.5 percent among blacks, but fell 0.5 percent among whites. There are fears, it said, that the disease could take hold in Asian and American Indian communities as well and spread rapidly.

Kevin Nephew of the National Native American AIDS Task Force, a service and education group based in Alexandria, Va., praised the report and called on tribal leaders to take AIDS seriously. There are fewer than two million American Indians, and some of the smaller tribes have as few as 500 members, he said at the briefing.

"If this disease infiltrates these communities, we are looking at the genocide of our people," said Mr. Nephew, who belongs to the 6,000-member Seneca tribe.

Public Hearings Held

The commission, which held public hearings around the country before writing its report, said there was a widespread feeling that the nation must recognize its ethnic diversity in designing AIDS prevention and treatment programs.

In addition, members of minorities must be included in clinical trials for AIDS treatments and should be involved in training health workers who have contact with their communities, it said.

The commission said policy makers must recognize that distrust of the Government and institutions, rooted in histories of discrimination, was a real and legitimate barrier to traditional public health initiatives that must be overcome with community involvement.

Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District of Columbia's Delegate to the House of Representatives, called the report noteworthy for frankly discussing the relationship between poverty and AIDS and praised it for raising some issues. For example, she said, conspiracy theories about the origin of AIDS are common among black Americans, including one notion that the disease was created in a laboratory by some Government agencies and unleashed upon minority groups and homosexuals.

"If it were truly a great conspiracy, there would be nothing you could do about it," Mrs. Norton said, "but the report shows that there is something individuals can do about this disease."