

Playing politics on AIDS

Reagan administration did too little for too long

By Loretta McLaughlin
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If the first cases of AIDS had struck the United States Olympic team, the White House response to the disease would have been very different — quick, sympathetic and openhanded about spending public money to find out what was infecting such stalwart examples of American youth.

That's what the gay community was saying back in 1981-82 in the immediate aftermath of the discovery of this lethal new disease among homosexual men in New York and California.

At the time, it was considered an unfair judgment. Too little was known about the disease; how deadly it was or how big the outbreak would be; how complex the AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) virus, how costly the treatment, how harrowing the illness, how difficult prevention.

Major ground already lost

All that is known now. And the view of the gay community — that the AIDS problem would not get the attention it deserved from this administration because the disease struck the "wrong" group first — has been vindicated.



Karen Stolper illustration

Because Reagan and key members of his administration have played politics with AIDS, major ground has already been lost in the fight to limit the spread of this disease.

The most prestigious science organizations in the nation, the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine, admitted last Thursday to being "quite honestly frightened" about the prospects for a nationwide AIDS catastrophe.

Though the scientists couched their criticism in polite terms, they firmly labeled the federal government's response

to the AIDS epidemic "woefully inadequate" in terms of public education, scientifically uncoordinated and lacking in cohesiveness; they also said the war against AIDS has been vastly underfunded.

With backhanded courtesy, they urged President Reagan to take on a "leadership role," one he has so far avoided, though he has occupied the Oval Office for the five years since the AIDS outbreak began during the first year of his first term.

Throughout that time, the White House has said little about AIDS. Not once

has there been a call for major action, even though the number of those stricken with the irreversibly lethal form of the disease has soared to 27,000, with more than half already dead.

In addition, more than a quarter of a million Americans have a chronic, debilitating and sometimes fatal form of the disease. As many as 1.5 million Americans are believed to be infected.

Far worse is coming soon. The US Public Health Service, in a May report, said that the next five years will see the AIDS

Cont'd on next page



Public health experts, from left, Sheldon M. Wolff, Samuel O. Thier and David Baltimore, discuss AIDS epidemic in Washington last week.

AIDS

from previous page

cases rise tenfold — to 270,000, and 179,000 deaths.

The comprehensive National Academy of Sciences report warns that the numbers may reach far higher. The number of those who are silently infected, but who convert to full-blown AIDS, is still rising. Up to 50 percent of the 1.5 million believed infected may be felled over five to 10 years, possibly as many as 750,000 Americans.

There was bitter irony in the president's only AIDS directive, a call last February for "a major report" on AIDS to be prepared by US Surgeon General Everett Koop. While publicly calling for the Koop report and designating AIDS "one of our highest priorities," Reagan, on the same day, also submitted budget requests reducing funds for AIDS research and other AIDS projects.

Congress had nearly tripled Reagan's \$85 million request for 1986 AIDS funds to \$244 million. Yet, while asking Koop to study AIDS, saying "we're going to continue to try to develop and test vaccines, and we're going to focus also on prevention," Reagan sought to rescind \$50 million from the 1986 AIDS budget. That move alone would have stymied the creation of regional treatment centers for testing experimental drugs — what experts say is the only ray of hope for AIDS patients. Congress blocked the cutback.

Congress again intervenes

For fiscal 1987, Reagan asked for only \$214 million for AIDS, \$30 million less than the 1986 appropriation. Again Congress intervened, nearly doubling this AIDS budget to \$410 million.

The only member of Reagan's Cabinet

to recognize the urgency of AIDS, citing it way back in 1984 as "the nation's number one health priority," was Secretary for Health and Human Services Margaret Heckler. A year later, she was replaced by Dr. Otis Bowen, whose highest priority is an insurance scheme to cover catastrophic nursing home bills and other Medicare costs.

Reagan has only spoken out two other times on AIDS: to send his and Nancy's condolences to their former movie colleague, Rook Hudson, when he was dying of AIDS; and to recently suggest that Americans might bank their own blood, as a precaution against an AIDS-contaminated blood transfusion.

Critics say that the lack of presidential leadership against AIDS has accommodated the highly vocal, fundamentalist religio-political factions that support him. From Jerry Falwell to Lyndon LaRouche, the preachers of political extremes have used the AIDS tragedy to condemn homosexual behavior and terrify the public.

But while politics are being played with AIDS, the disease itself is threatening to become a ballooning epidemic here and around the world — perhaps the most challenging infectious agent ever confronted by modern science.

Insidiousness of the disease

There has never been a microbe before like the AIDS virus, that, like a double agent, destroys the very system that should protect a person against infection. Nor has there been a virus that singles out to kill the precise cells that should set the protective process in motion. AIDS patients die of latent infections and cancers that arise when they are so compromised.

None of this is news to the Reagan administration. The grim nature of this disease is evident in the bleak statistics published weekly by the federal Centers for Disease Control.

Even so, many have begun to question

whether the CDC has avoided — or at least delayed — reporting what would be viewed as politically unwelcome ramifications of AIDS.

Insiders say there was CDC resistance to publishing military studies of recruits who are infected — proportionately four times as many as civilian blood donors. These reports were the first and the strongest to detect the spread of the disease to America's young heterosexual adults and by women to men.

Only last week did CDC highlight findings that show AIDS is twice as prevalent in the nation's black and Hispanic adults and children, particularly the poor, in proportion to their numbers — though the data have been gathered across four years.

CDC has still not defined the chronic form of AIDS, nor sought its reporting. While strict definitions of AIDS were justified early in the epidemic in order to carefully monitor it, many, including the Academy scientists, now feel that AIDS-related cases should be recognized — counted and provided for. By excluding them from official definitions and counts, for whatever reason, CDC also has kept official AIDS numbers artificially low and prevented chronic AIDS patients from being eligible for publicly funded health and disability benefits.

One doctor's warning

Dr. James Noble, director of infectious diseases at Carney Hospital in Boston, a facility that cares for a large share of the city's poor, expresses the view of many doctors now treating AIDS patients, when he says, "Lack of knowledge about the extent and the impact of diseases caused by the AIDS virus among the urban poor is an enormous problem. This problem has been neglected by authorities from the president on down."

Because too little has been done for too long, it may now be too late to avert a national health disaster.

When the National Academy of Science panelists, who devised the sweeping new AIDS report, were asked who is now at risk for AIDS (America's blood supply being virtually AIDS-free), they answered: drug addicts, their sexual partners, their children to be and anyone — gay or straight, city or rural — at risk for a sexually transmitted disease.

Those diseases range from 90,000 cases of syphilis a year to 1.8 million of gonorrhea. While these diseases may be more easily spread than AIDS, the difference is that they are curable and not forever transmissible as is AIDS.

Dr. Koop finally faced up to the menace of AIDS in his report, urging all-out preventive sex education for the public, starting as early as the fourth grade. Even here, however, politics seemed still to be the foremost consideration.

Koop's report was to be issued "around the first of June." He did not release it, however, until a week after he was briefed on the content of the Academy panel's study — in time to take the gloss off that report and to give the mistaken impression that the White House had done something about AIDS.