Dental Damns

Tooth tech with HIV gets army boot

March 1, 1997 By Walter Armstrong and Ronnilyn Pustil

After testing HIV positive last summer, a U.S. Army dental hygienist in Hanau, Germany was bounced from a clinic job and returned to the United States. Army officials made HIV counseling and testing available to some 1,100 soldiers and family members treated by the technician, who for 16 months provided “noninvasive” dental care such as teeth cleaning and X-rays. Because the soldier was “absolutely meticulous in dental hygiene,” there was “virtually no risk” of HIV transmission, according to Army spokesperson Barbara Slifer.

Through a campaign in local media and registered mail, Army officials announced that patients at the Hanau clinic had been seen by a hygienist with HIV. Of 220 patients identified, 136 have had HIV tests. All have tested negative. Slifer said the soldier’s name, age and sex were not disclosed, and that the soldier had already left Gemrany-Army policy allows none of its estimated 1,300 HIV positive personnel to serve overseas. Slifer adds she did not know whether the soldier would be permitted to work as a hygienist or continue to serve in the Army.

But American Dental Association spokesperson Chris Martin said these measures are both unnecessary and unjust. “Having HIV is no reason for a medical professional to discontinue his or her practice. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s guidelines for health care workers offer sufficient protection against HIV transmission.”

According to the CDC, which has investigated more than 15,000 patients of 32 HIV positive dentists and doctors, the only possible instance of transmission was the oft-disputed 1990 case of Florida dentist David Acer, who allegedly infected Kimberly Bergalis and four other patients.

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