First Case Scenario

UNFIT TO PRINT: 40,000 doctors and medical workers, and 835 reporters, received the CDC's report of a strange pneumonia in five "active homosexuals" in L.A. Only three newshounds sniffed a story in the stats.

June 1, 2001 By John Morgan Wilson

I remember the '70s as the most exhilarating and empowering of my life. In 1971, I left the closet and joined the gay-liberation movement in Los Angeles. For the next decade we danced, got high, made love, organized and marched in the streets with unabashed pride.

On June 5, 1981, the Center for Disease Control ran a short item on the second page of its *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*: Several L.A. doctors had discovered *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP) in five previously healthy "active homosexuals" -- an oddity, the study stated, because PCP was "almost exclusively limited to severely immunosuppressed patients." Few realized it then, but this obscure report was the unofficial harbinger of the AIDS epidemic.

"The first reaction on all sides was confusion, bewilderment," recalls Dr. Michael Gottlieb, then a 31-year-old assistant professor of medicine at UCLA who co-authored the report and took the lead in getting it published. *"What does this mean?"* As baffled as Gottlieb was, his special interest as a clinician-researcher of immune-deficient conditions caused him to take notice, he says, when the strange cases of PCP in gay men "stuck out." (For more on Gottlieb's discovery, see "Longtime Companion.")

For myself, I remember being utterly mystified by the news, but with a vague sense of dread gnawing at my gut. Reaction among gay activists ranged from curiosity to denial to alarm, but for most of us the party continued unabated -- at least for a while.

Gottlieb recalls that from the outset he sensed a coming plague. "As a doctor, I felt powerless," he says. "Our responsibility was to have answers, and we had no answers." After that, of course, came the horror: "Those next 15 years were very rough on people," he says, and then adds, "Needless to say, that's a terrible understatement." Now in private practice, Gottlieb sees about 20 HIVers a day. And if AIDS disappeared tomorrow? Gottlieb doesn't have to think before answering. "I'd watch my patients mature," he says. "We'd grow old together."

Of course, AIDS won't disappear tomorrow. Neither, for many of us, will the memory of those 15 horrific years, as the losses mounted so numbingly and the dream of gay liberation took a catastrophic detour, all foreshadowed by that mysterious medical announcement that flew by as

we made our summer plans in 1981.

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