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What's news in the world of AIDS

June 1, 1994 By Bill Henning

Don't Do It Rudy

New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani shocked even his most hardened opponents in the AIDS activist community when his first budget proposed the total elimination of the city's Division of AIDS Services (DAS). DAS assigns caseworkers to PWAs to help them negotiate the city's maze of agencies as they seek the services and benefits they need to survive. Since Giuliani's budget proposal, the mayor has been relentlessly dogged at his public appearances by furious city activists (principally from ACT UP/ New York) who have also marched across the Brooklyn Bridge in protest and set up a camp of skull-masked wraiths near city hall. Giuliani will have to barter with New York's City Council over the final form of the city's budget. Giuliani, though trying to ignore the numerous disruptions, will soon have to address the DAS issue. Stay tuned.

Follow-up

Regarding media column in POZ #1, "Whatever Happened to The New York Times and AIDS?", The New York Times has still not named a successor to the late Jeffrey Schmalz, the paper's openly HIV positive and gay AIDS reporter. "The New York Times moves at a glacial pace at just about everything it does," says Carolyn Lee, a Times assistant managing editor who plays a key role in newsroom hiring and assigning. "Jeff was not the only person covering AIDS," says Lee, who adds, "We don't feel the beat is going uncovered." She says, however that the paper's AIDS coverage will intensify when Schmalz's successor is named, but she won't predict when that will happen.

It has been five full months since Schmalz died. At the current rate if approximately 100 deaths per day, 15,000 Americans have died from AIDS while The New York Times, the nation's glacier of record, inches toward finally naming Schmalz's successor. According to an inside source, that's one statistic some of the paper's openly gay employees have been noting with increasing bitterness. Indeed, whatever happened to AIDS?
-Mark Schoofs

Men of Color Bias

Men of color who have sex with other men account for one-third of the cumulative U.S. AIDS cases; yet the first-ever federal study of AIDS prevention programs targeted at that population has founded the programs to be severely underfunded. The 14-month study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) examined AIDS prevention programs for gay and bisexual men of

color in five cities: Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, Oklahoma City and San Juan, Puerto Rico. Funding for the prevention programs in each of the cities ranged from only 1 percent to 13 percent of available city or county AIDS prevention monies. A national advocacy group of gay men, a Campaign for Fairness, first petitioned the CDC in 1991 to conduct a study.

Oral Sex By Mail

How dangerous is oral sex? That quiestion has naffed at safer sex practioners and educators alike since safe sex was invented. Recently Gay Men's Health Crisis assembled a panel of community representatives and medical experts from the University of Minnesota, New Mexico Department of Public Health, Cornell, Harvard and Columbia and held a conference on "Oral Sex and the Possible Transmission of HIV." The package including audio tapes of the forum, the program and a written summary are now available by writing to: Gay Men's Health Crisis, Oral Sex Tapes, 129 West 20th St., New York, New York 10011. A $25 donation is requested.

It's a Tough Job, Kris

In shockingly simplistic and broad terms, National AIDS Policy Coordinator Kristine Gebbie released a new so-called federal action plan to the fight the 13-year old pandemic. The plan lays out 15 goals for AIDS research, service and prevention. They include getting accurate prevention information to all Americans, help for those living with AIDS and the goal of a safe blood supply worldwide. Nationally, AIDS groups are understandably confused by Gebbie's plan because of its utter lack of specifics on timelines, budget figures, review of existing programs and other relevant factors.

To stave off mounting criticism, Gebbie has been sending letters to numerous leaders in the AIDS community explaining that the action plan released was, in fact, not an action plan at all but a "starting point to build from."

Dan Bross, executive director of AIDS Action Council, a Washington, D.C. advocacy group, begs to differ. "Why didn't we get this letter six months ago?" he asks. "The problem with Gebbie is that she is not an activist, she is a caretaker. I bet that President Clinton is willing to go a lot further than Gebbie's even proposed. I know it's a new office for her and certain adjustments must be made, but people's lives are hanging in the balance here. She has got to make her office effective."

But Gebbie sticks to her guns. "This [plan] was just a broad agenda from where a more specific action agenda can be achieved."

So can her office be more effective? "My biggest frustration thus far have been adjusting to the sheer size of the job [as AIDS coordinator] as well as mastering just how the federal bureaucracy work. I've learned that the system takes time," Gebbie says.

"We don't go to Gebbie for anything," Bross says. "No one knows how Washington works over there. I'll tell you this, Kris Gebbie is not being well served by her staff."

Who needs Whitewater?
-Richard Pérez-Feria

Resisting L-735, 524
AIDS researchers at Merck Pharmaceuticals who are studying the company's new protease inhibitor L-735,524 have reported signs of HIV resistance to the drug. Initial reports on the drug showed dramatic decreases in HIV levels in the blood of study participants, who also experiences weight gains and overall improvement in their physical condition. After six months of treatment, however, three of four participants' viral levels had returned to their original range. Merck scientists are now focusing on testing L-735,524 in combination with other antiretrovirals. They hope to stagger HIV with a one-two punch.

1-2-3 Punch
At the first meeting of the new National Task Force on AIDS Drug Development, 16 drug companies recently announced their support for a new clinical plan to quickly test triple drug combinations against AIDS. The program known as the Inter-Company Collaboration on AIDS Drug Development (ICC), will begin its first four trials in the fall. Each trial is slated to enroll about 100 relatively healthy PWAs who have not previously taken any AIDS drugs.

Feline Bacteria Risk
Medical researchers at the University of California at San Francisco have discovered that a bacteria carried by 40 percent of house cats can infect humans. The bacteria Rochalimea henselae which usually does not affect the cats, can cause liver disease, endocartitis which degenerates heart valves, cat-scratch fever and bacillary angiomatosis (BA) in humans. People who have severely weakened immune systems are particularly susceptible to the infections, and BA is of particular concern to PWAs because it causes lesions on the skin which can be easily mistaken for Kaposi's sarcoma. PWAs with cats are cautioned never to allow their cats to lick any open sore or wound and to always wash their hands after playing with their cats, especially if bitten or scratched.

Concorde Fallout
At last June's Berlin AIDS Conference, preliminary results from the Concorde Study suggested that early AZT treatment in asymptomatic people with HIV does not prolong life. Since then the agency which distributes all antiretrovirals in Ontario, the Ontario HIV Project Center, has recorded a 45 percent decrease in the number of patients starting AZT therapy for the first time. A 52 percent decline in AZT use was observed in all the asymptomatic patients who had previously undergone AZT therapy.

AZT Helps Newborns?
In February, preliminary results of ACTG 076, a National Institute of Health (NIH) study, showed that transmission of HIV from pregnant women to their babies was reduced by two-thirds of the mother was given AZT during pregnancy and the newborn continued AZT therapy for six weeks after birth. The early findings were so dramatic that the study was halted so that the mothers and babies receiving a placebo in the trial could instead be given the drug.

Blood, Art & the NEA

HIV positive performance artist Ron Athey says he combines Hindu and African rituals with AIDS issues in his art which features Athey piercing, cutting and carving designs into his own flesh or into that of an assistant. A recent performance sponsored by the Minneapolis' Walker Art Center caused one audience member to faint and another to complain to the health department. Because $100 of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funds were used for the show, the incident has sparked the first controversy for the new NEA chairwoman Jane Alexander who says logically "not all art is for everybody." Athey has defended his work as an affirmation of his "right to bleed publicly as a person with AIDS."

Ecstasy & Unsafe Sex

Partygoers at Fire Island's 10th Annual Morning Party benefit for Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) last summer were pleasantly surprised to receive, along with their tickets, an educational brochure about the effects and dangers of a number of illegal, recreational drugs. A thorough follow-up article in a recent issue of the group's monthly Treatment Issues newsletter gathered the findings of several studies which showed that MDMA popularly known as Ecstasy was significantly correlated with an increase in HIV infection that me by the result of a relaxation of safer sex practices.

O-T-C Zovirax

Burroughs Wellcome has filed an application seeking FDA approval for the sale of acyclovir without a precscription. Acyclovir, the most popular drug used for treating herpes, is marketed by Burroughs under the name Zovirax. If approved, acyclovir would be the first drug ever used to treat a sexually transmitted disease to become readily available over-the counter.

Inhale to the Chief

Saying that its decision was supported by many medical experts who testified that marijuana's medicinal value is unproven, a U.S. Court of Appeals has upheld the Bush-instituted ban on the use of marijuana to ease the ill effects of AIDS, cancer and other diseases. All eyes have since turned to the White House, which let it be known early this year that it was considering reversing the ban.

John Curry, 44

1976 Olympic figure skating gold medalist John Curry died of AIDS in April in his native England. Curry was credited with revolutionizing the genteel sport by combining athleticism with dance.

Derek Jarman, 52

London filmmaker, Derek Jarman died in February after a long and public battle with AIDS. His challenging, independent films (Caravaggio, The Last of England, Edward II) were starkly influenced by his homosexuality. In a recent interview, Jarman said that in his work he was simply trying to demystify things such as his sexuality or HIV infection, parts of life which he called "very ordinary."

Robert Massa, 36

Robert Massa, The Village Voice's AIDS editor, died in New York City on April 9. He had written

regularly about the disease in the Voice since 1983. Massa became founding editor of Body Positive, a monthly newsletter for people with HIV, 1987 (the year he tested positive). His writings about AIDS earned him a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship in 1990.

Marlon Riggs, 37

Marlon Riggs, a filmmaker who won Emmy and Peabody awards for his documentaries died of AIDS on April 5. The graphic content of Tongues Untied, his autobiographical 1989 film about black gay sexuality, caused an uproar when it was scheduled to appear on public television. PBS affiliates in several parts of the country refused to air Rigg’s work and conservatives objected because the film had received a $5,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

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