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AIDS: CIVIL RIGHTS OR PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

Is AIDS, the deadly disease that afflicts primarily male homosexuals, a civil rights issue or a public health issue?

For several years, certain politically-active groups have been courting campaign support by the homosexuals. The 1984 Democratic Party Platform promises to stop "discrimination based on ... sexual orientation." The Platform further pledges specific support of gay rights legislation in the workplace, in the military, and in immigration.

The National Education Assocation's 1985 Journal demands that "sexual orientation" NOT be used as a reason in decisions to hire or dismiss teachers. The National Organization for Women endorses gay rights at its annual convention every year.

As a result of this visible support by political activists, gay rights bills have been introduced into Congress (with 57 cosponsors) and into many state legislatures. However, the passage of such legislation by the Wisconsin Legislature in 1981 may have been the peak of the gays' political support.

Democratic Party Chairman Paul Kirk was recently reported to have said, "Fringe issues and lifestyles such as gay rights cannot be the priority in the dialogue of a major party." That looks like he may have gotten a strong political message from the four-to-one vote against a gay rights ordinance in Houston last January 19.

What has happened in the last year is a growing public awareness of the danger of the disease called AIDS. News reports appearing in the metropolitan press have been low-key and sporadic, but the facts they contain are frightening.

This is because every family has a potential need for blood transfusions, if only from an automobile accident. Of the 10,226 confirmed cases of AIDS reported by the Centers for Disease Control in May (of which 5,008 are already dead), 220 were caused by blood transfusions or the use of blood products, and 21 were children.

In San Francisco, a 66-year old Roman Catholic nun died from AIDS as a result of a blood transfusion received after she broke her leg while on an outing with her kinder-

garten class. Patrick Burk, a 27-year-old hemophiliac in Washington, D.C., got AIDS from a blood transfusion and then unwittingly passed it on to his wife, who in turn infected their baby.

This spring, the Department of Health and Human Services approved the first commercial test to help detect the AIDS virus and protect the nation's blood supply. But the test isn't wholly satisfactory; some scientists believe it may err with "false positive" laboratory readings, and others believe it may err with "false negative" readings.

The latter is because the test is predicated on detecting antibodies to the virus. But an unknown number of people infected with the AIDS virus do not develop the antibodies, according to research at the Harvard School of Public Health.

The Washington Post reported that "as many as 400,000 Americans may have been exposed to the AIDS virus." The head of the AIDS task force at the Centers for Disease Control, Dr. James W. Curran, estimates that "300,000 to one million Americans have been infected by the [AIDS] virus."

The New England Journal of Medicine reported that the AIDS virus may persist without causing symptoms in an infected person for more than four years and still be transmissible through blood transfusion. The report stressed the importance of identifying high-risk donors in order to prevent future donations from them. A separate study by scientists at the Centers for Disease Control shows that such symptom-free persistence of the virus may last more than five years.

The issue of closing the gay bathhouses (of which there are about 168 around the country), which are the meetings places for highly-promiscuous homosexuals, has split the homosexual community. San Francisco tried closing the bathhouses, only to have a California Superior Court judge open them again after only two months.

The issues popping up in courts around the country range all the way from the AIDS-infected New York prostitute who is permitted to stay on the streets because no law permits the state to confine her, to the Maine high school teacher demanding his academic rights to invite a homosexual to lecture in the classroom.

Predictions are that the number of AIDS victims will double by next year. What can society do to protect itself?