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## Academy of Sciences Warns

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# 'AIDS epidemic could become catastrophe'

by Warren J. Hamerman

On Oct. 29 the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) released a courageous 374-page report to the nation, entitled *Confronting AIDS: Directions for Public Health, Health Care, and Research*, which for the first time officially lifted the lid off the cover-up on the true threat of AIDS which the Atlanta Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have been irresponsibly maintaining. The IOM-NAS report asserts: "A sizeable proportion of those now infected will, in a few years, progress to severe disease and death. If the spread of the virus is not checked, the present epidemic could become a catastrophe."

The report called for a \$2 billion annual budget before the end of the decade from federal sources: \$1 billion for basic biomedical research and \$1 billion for education and other public health measures such as blood screening.

Ironically, five days before the IOM-NAS report appeared, those two national institutions were placed in charge of an emergency investigation of the collapsing CDC, which has lost all institutional credibility because of its repeated mismanagement of the AIDS program. Seven of the CDC AIDS laboratory's 13 senior scientists have either quit, been fired, or transferred from the AIDS program. At least two of the remaining six scientists have announced that they will also leave as a result of turmoil at the CDC. Dr. Paul Luciw, the University of California virologist who helped decipher the genetic code of the AIDS virus, commented on the turmoil at CDC: "It is not easy to get people who are skilled and creative. I don't see them recovering. They've lost their credibility almost completely."

### Projections of a catastrophe

Among the summary of the IOM-MAS report are the following:

- There is a likely 10-fold increase in AIDS cases over the next five years.
- Anyone who has antibodies to the virus must be assumed to be infected and probably capable of transmitting the virus.
- A person infected with HIV may not show any clinical

symptoms for months or even years, but apparently never becomes free of the virus. This long, often unrecognized period of asymptomatic infection, during which an infected person can infect others, complicates control of the spread of the virus.

- There have been 24,500 AIDS cases and an additional 50,000 to 125,000 ARC cases already counted.
- At least 25 to 50% of infected persons will progress to AIDS within 5 to 10 years of infection. The possibility that the percentage is higher cannot be ruled out.
- There is no satisfactory treatment now for HIV infection. Prospects are not promising for at least five years and probably longer for a vaccine or an acceptable cure.
- By the end of 1991, there will have been a cumulative total of more than 270,000 cases of AIDS in the United States, with more than 74,000 of those occurring in 1991 alone.
- By the end of 1991 there will have been a cumulative total of more than 179,000 U.S. AIDS deaths, with more than 54,000 of those in 1991 alone.
- Because the typical time between infection and development of clinical AIDS is four or more years, most of the persons who will develop AIDS between now and 1991 are already infected.
- Pediatric AIDS cases will increase almost 10-fold in the next five years.
- There will be substantially more cases in the heterosexual population over the next 5 to 10 years.
- The estimate for the direct cost of health care for the 174,000 AIDS patients projected to be alive during the year 1991, will be \$8 billion to \$16 billion in that year alone. This projection does not include the cost for treating ARC cases.
- There are an estimated 10 million individuals infected worldwide; the developing sector will suffer the most from the disease.

### Recommendations

The committee of prestigious scientists calls for the creation of a National Commission on AIDS as a presidential or joint presidential-congressional commission. It calls upon the President and the cabinet secretaries to exert strong personal leadership. Specifically, it recommends that the President take a strong leadership role in the effort against AIDS, designating control of AIDS as a major national goal and ensuring that the financial, human, and institutional resources needed to combat HIV infection and to care for AIDS patients be provided. It calls upon the Congress to increase research and public health/education funding to a combined total of \$2 billion annually by 1990.

The IOM-NAS Committee on a National Strategy for AIDS is coordinated by a steering committee of 11 scientists co-chaired by Dr. David Baltimore and Dr. Sheldon M. Wolff. In addition to the steering committee, the report was prepared by 23 scientists grouped into a Research Panel and a Health Care and Public Health Panel.