

Editorial

AIDS: a disease out of control

The Fifth International Conference on AIDS opened in Montreal this month, with predictions by the World Health Organization's Jonathan Mann that nine times more people will become infected with the AIDS virus during the 1990s than in the current decade. "We expect that the decade of the 1990s will be worse—and perhaps much worse—than the 1980s," said Mann, whose wildly irresponsible actions over the past several years have contributed to the epidemic's explosive spread.

Mann said he estimates that 5-10 million people worldwide are now infected with AIDS, meaning that WHO is anticipating that as many as 90 million people will become infected over the next 10 years. Equally shocking results came from New York City, where of 169 men tested in a shelter for the homeless, 105 tested positive for the HIV infection.

Dr. Ramon Torres, a physician at the shelter, announced the findings, and a spokesman for a homeless coalition attending the conference, characterized the report as "horrible news," because they had been estimating the number of homeless infected with the disease at 15%. One out of every 200 Americans, on average, is thought to carry the disease.

Results such as this, indicating that the spread of AIDS is now virtually unchecked among the poorest sections of the urban poor, have forced a telling reversal in the general official coverup. They have also been the occasion for more and more people to take up civil rights leader Samuel Evans's charge, in an open letter issued last March 3, that the unchecked spread of AIDS is the result of a government policy of genocide.

Until recently, the Bush and Reagan administrations have done everything to hide the enormity of a public health crisis which they are unprepared to meet. Clearly budgets which cut back on medical payments to the poor and subsidies to hospitals are not intended to deal with what is fast becoming the new Black Death.

Reality, however, has a way of asserting itself. New York City's health commissioner, Dr. Stephen Joseph, announced a stunning about-face on June 5, at the Montreal conference, where he declared that New

York City will begin to collect the names of everyone who tests positive for AIDS. Only a month before Joseph himself had denounced such measures in a letter to the *New York Post*. New York City has adopted a new policy of centralizing the names of AIDS carriers, in order to track down their drug and sex partners. The plan will go into effect as soon as new studies are published purporting to show the efficacy of a new AIDS treatment.

The new policy effectively ends the era of anonymous testing, and represents a small concession to the need for public health measures to control the epidemic. Joseph said in Montreal: "Changes in our capacity to prevent and treat infection will usher in a new era in which policies will shift toward a disease-control approach to HIV infection along the lines of classic tuberculosis practices. Within a confidential public-health framework, reporting of seropositives (HIV), followup to assure adequate treatment, and more aggressive contact tracing will become standard public-health applications for controlling HIV infection and illness."

We can welcome such a small note of sanity in what is otherwise still a brutal picture of the unchecked spread of this fatal disease. For example, researchers reported a secondary, AIDS-related epidemic of tuberculosis. In Zambia, while 10% of patients suffering from TB who are over the age of 60 will prove to be HIV-positive, 80% of those around the age of 30 will be found to be infected. Overall there was a 62% correlation of TB and AIDS.

Despite the circulation of such information, the Montreal conference as a whole resembled a circus, with countless condom stands, videos about condoms, and similar advertisements about the advantages of "safe sex," and the emotional needs of homosexuals. There was even a Wednesday noon session devoted to a seminar entitled, "Erotica," which discussed the pros and cons of pornography. A scientist from one African country put it bluntly: "I can't stand this anymore. When will they stop collecting data and do something about the epidemic?" When, indeed?