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Subgroup/Office of Origin: National AIDS Policy Office
Series/Staff Member: Kristine Gebbie
Subseries:

OA/ID Number: 8301
FolderID:

Folder Title:
[Veterans Affairs AIDS Research] [loose]

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Office of Public Affairs
News Service

Washington, D.C. 20420
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Department of
Veterans Affairs

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

VA'S AIDS RESEARCH CONTRIBUTES TO EFFECTIVE, COST-EFFICIENT CARE

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has intensified its investigative effort to combat the deadly epidemic of AIDS and is engaged in a wide range of studies, including clinical trials and the cost of treating AIDS patients.

"AIDS is the health crisis of this century," said VA Secretary Jesse Brown. "Our efforts reflect the enormous human and financial cost of HIV infection to patients and society."

A comparison of the differences in costs of care among patients with AIDS-related *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP) according to hospital type was conducted at the VA Medical Center in Durham, N.C. Using data on 619 patients the investigators showed that, compared with other public and private hospitals, the average monthly inpatient and outpatient cost of care was lowest at VA hospitals. Mean monthly inpatient and outpatient costs for PCP patients who were hospitalized at public hospitals were \$5,468 and \$506, respectively; \$6,438 and \$616 at private hospitals; and \$3,128 and \$366 at VA hospitals.

The investigators currently are studying the possible causes for these cost differences and are focusing on three areas: access to care, quality of care improvement based on provider experience, and the overuse of services. As the largest single provider of health care in the nation, VA may be an example of how a large medical system works to reduce hospitalizations and overall health-care costs.

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The AIDS epidemic has prompted several VA researchers to investigate new antiviral drugs that may stop the fatal progression of HIV infection. Investigators at VA Medical Centers in Durham, N.C., and Manhattan, N.Y., have shown that although early treatment with zidovudine (AZT) may delay the onset of symptoms in HIV-positive patients, it does not prolong the lives of patients infected with the virus. The study further demonstrated that AZT resistance occurs more often in those on early treatment and that the cost of routinely administering AZT early is \$65,000 per year of life without AIDS. The study answered several important clinical questions, the impact of which is very likely to affect clinical practice and the cost of patient care.

Also at Durham, VA investigators propose to look at the efficacy of a promising HIV vaccine in substance-abusing veterans. The individuals at greatest risk for HIV infection and AIDS are those who use drugs, especially IV drugs. Another study undertaken by VA researchers in Newington, Conn., is already recruiting patients to evaluate whether immunotherapy with the Salk HIV immunogen will significantly slow or reverse the progression of disease for those with mild to moderate infection.

Opportunistic infections in HIV-positive patients often result in hospitalizations which increase the cost of care and reduce the quality of life. An alarming rise in the case rates of individuals who are co-infected with HIV and tuberculosis recently has been seen. VA investigators in Washington, D.C., are participating in a multicenter clinical trial using the drug rifabutin to compare a short-course of drug therapy to the standard 12-month course in the prevention of clinical tuberculosis.

As reported in the Oct. 18, 1993, issue of The Scientist, VA investigators are publishing a significant number of research papers on AIDS in terms of both volume and impact. VA was ranked 8th in the number of citations during a survey of AIDS-related papers published in the years 1988-1992 -- publishing 4,665 manuscripts during that period.

VA is the largest single source of direct health-care services in the nation, providing treatment to 14,080 individuals with AIDS during fiscal year 1993.

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Jan. 7, 1994

(Dist: I,3,5,7,9,10)



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VA Fact Sheet

AIDS TREATMENT AND RESEARCH IN THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Nov. 1993

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was first recognized in the United States in 1981. A debilitating fatal disease, AIDS represents the most severe manifestation of infection with a retrovirus widely known as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). Reporting in VA began in 1983 when 61 patients were treated in VA's health-care system.

VA, the largest single source of direct health-care services in the nation, provided treatment to 14,080 individuals with AIDS during fiscal year 1993.

WORKLOAD AND TREATMENT

VA established four AIDS Clinical Units at VA medical centers in New York City, Miami, West Los Angeles and San Francisco, where approximately 21 percent of all VA AIDS patients are treated. As of Sep. 30, 1993, 18,697 AIDS cases had been reported by VA hospitals since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. The total number of new VA AIDS cases for fiscal year 1993 was 4,617. This year's data reflect the expansion of the Center for Disease Control's surveillance definition for AIDS. The geographic pattern of the epidemic mirrors that seen in the nation, with the majority of VA cases reported in large urban and coastal cities. Approximately one-half of all VA AIDS patients reported were white, compared to 51 percent nationally. Blacks accounted for 37 percent of all VA patients compared to 31 percent nationally, and Hispanics comprised 11 percent of the cases compared to 17 percent of AIDS cases nationally. Although women make up 4 percent of the veteran population, they accounted for fewer than 1 percent of AIDS cases reported.

TRAINING

During FY 1993 national HIV/AIDS conferences brought together VA practitioners for information updates and the exchange of effective HIV/AIDS-related patient care strategies. A workshop for thirteen VA medical centers that, together, care for over half of the VA AIDS patients and a meeting of VA physicians who provide primary care to veterans with HIV infection highlighted the training year. During FY 1993, educational efforts also were continued to provide HIV/AIDS education staff trainers at all VA medical centers as well as counselors who provide pre- and post-HIV antibody test counseling.

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AIDS, cont.

The AIDS Service in VA was established in 1988. It maintains the VA HIV/AIDS Registry, a national database designed to collect both clinical and resource data for local and national tracking of the epidemic. The database tracks four categories of disease, two HIV+ infected and two AIDS categories. The AIDS Service also serves as a clearinghouse for AIDS information, recommends policy and advises the Under Secretary for Health on AIDS-related issues.

RESEARCH

AIDS Research Centers are located at VA medical centers in Durham, N.C.; San Diego; New York; and Atlanta. VA is engaged in the entire spectrum of AIDS research -- from basic science studies of the mechanism of the AIDS virus infection through clinical trials in the treatment of AIDS patients.

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Research

Education

Clinical Care

A Research Perspective

The best health care often originates in an environment of inquiry, originality and insight. VA research program creates such an environment. The goal of VA biomedical and behavioral research programs is:

- *to enhance the patient care mission of VA health care facilities,*
- *to continually improve the standard of care provided to patients, and*
- *to provide the mechanism to recruit and retain the best health care employees in the VA system.*

The same tenets that guide VA medical research serve to guide VA's response to the AIDS epidemic. VA has more than 200 separate AIDS research projects currently in progress at 30 VA medical centers. In fiscal year 1989, VA committed more than \$4 million for special HIV activities. During the same year, VA investigators received more than \$7.1 million for AIDS research from other sources.

VA research projects on HIV and AIDS are supported in four categories:

Career Development

Career Development awards provide support for VA clinical investigators at all levels to conduct biomedical research, including AIDS research. In FY 1990 VA awarded more than 240 of these awards to associate investigators, research associates, clinical investigators, medical investigators and senior medical investigators.

Merit Review

Merit review is the heart of VA's Medical Research Service Program. AIDS-related projects in VA medical research are diverse. They include clinical projects, clinical investigation projects (particularly drug treatment trials) and basic science projects.

Specialized Research Initiatives

Specialized research initiatives are extremely important in VA's response to AIDS. Six VA medical centers provide the facilities, resources and personnel to conduct innovative basic and clinical research. They include New York, NY; Baltimore, MD; Durham, NC; Houston, TX and San Diego and San Francisco, CA.

Cooperative Studies

Cooperative studies support a major VA clinical trial of AZT in HIV patients. This should help investigators determine the value of early versus late AZT in the prevention of disease progression and death, as well as the emergence of resistance and the development of acute and cumulative toxicity. This clinical trial has completed the enrollment of 338 patients in six VA medical centers and Walter Reed Army Medical Center. It will provide invaluable information on the long-term benefits of AZT.



*The microbiology lab, AIDS Clinical Unit,
VA Medical Center, New York*



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

Facts About AIDS

How To Protect Yourself And Your Family

What To Tell Others

An Important Message from the Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Public Health Service,
and the Centers for Disease Control

What Is AIDS?

AIDS stands for *acquired immune deficiency syndrome*. It is a disease caused by a virus that can damage the brain and destroy the body's ability to fight off illness. AIDS by itself doesn't kill. But it allows other infections (such as pneumonia, cancer and other illnesses) to invade the body, and these illnesses can kill.

At the present time, there is no known cure for AIDS, and no vaccine that prevents the disease. Fortunately, the AIDS virus is hard to catch and its transmission can be prevented. This virus is identified as *human immunodeficiency virus* (HIV).

How Do People Get The AIDS Virus?

Not everyone is at risk for AIDS. And people who are at risk can protect themselves if they take reasonable precautions. Being safe from AIDS is up to you. It's your responsibility to protect yourself and those you love. It starts with knowing how people get AIDS.



"AIDS continues without a cure or vaccine. The only defense we have is education. It is the responsibility of each of us to learn the facts about how this disease is spread and then take the necessary steps to protect ourselves and those we love."

—Doris Hadley R.N., M.N.

Nurse Epidemiologist

San Francisco, VA Medical Center

What About Blood Transfusions?

In the past, some people did get AIDS from infected blood transfusions. But today, this is extremely rare. They received transfusions of blood obtained before 1985, when all

blood began to be tested. All donated blood is tested for the AIDS virus.

There is no risk from donating blood. New equipment is used for each donor, each time blood is given.

How Can You Tell If You Have The AIDS Virus?

The only way to tell if you have the AIDS virus is by having a blood test. The test looks for changes in your blood caused by the presence of the virus. If you test positive, it means that you have probably been infected.

Three main ways
the AIDS virus is spread:

Having sex with an
HIV-infected person

Sharing needles and syringes

Babies can be born with the virus
if the mother has been HIV-infected

Three Words Every Vet Should Know: AIDS Doesn't Discriminate

An Important Message from the Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Public Health Service,
and the Centers for Disease Control

Who Gets AIDS?

Race and age don't matter, anyone can get AIDS. Men, women and children get AIDS. Veterans can get AIDS. Although AIDS affects us all, not everyone is at risk. And even those people who are at risk can protect themselves if they take reasonable precautions. Being safe from AIDS is up to you. It's your responsibility to protect yourself and those you love. It starts with knowing the three ways people get AIDS: By having sex with someone who has been infected with the AIDS virus. By using a needle or syringe that have been used by someone infected with the AIDS virus. And, by being born to a woman who has been infected with the AIDS virus.

What Is AIDS?

AIDS stands for *acquired immune deficiency syndrome*. It is not as complicated as it sounds, but it is deadly. AIDS is a disease caused by a virus



"It's true we still don't have the cure for AIDS and that's frightening, but we do have the means to stop the spread of this disease—accurate information and responsible behavior."

—Marla Judd, R.N.
AIDS Coordinator
Long Beach, VA Medical Center

identified as *human immunodeficiency virus* (HIV) that destroys the body's ability to fight off illness.

The AIDS virus alone does not kill, but it makes it so that your body is unable to fight off other diseases. (Such as pneumonia or cancer) And those are the types of illness that can kill.

One of the most frightening facts about HIV is that once you get it, you can carry it

around for years without knowing it. And you have it forever. Right now there is no known cure for AIDS, and no vaccine that prevents it. But fortunately, the AIDS virus is hard to catch and that's what makes it preventable.

How Can You Tell If You Have The AIDS Virus?

The only way you can tell if you've been exposed to the AIDS virus is by having a blood test. The test looks for changes in your blood caused by the presence of the virus. If you test negative, that doesn't mean you can't get AIDS, it just means that you didn't have it when you were tested. If you test positive, it means you've probably been infected.

You can have the AIDS virus without having AIDS, or without even appearing or feeling ill. And you can transmit the virus to others. If you are worried that you may have been infected, find out about the test. It is available at any VA Medical Center.

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GRAM

VACO Newsletter for HIV/AIDS Coordinators

Quarter 4, Fiscal Year 1993

July, August, September 1993

Inside This Issue:

- Director's Corner
- Modifications to the HIV Registry Package
- Berlin AIDS Conference Update
- Ring in the New...
- HIV/AIDS National Training Program: FY 93 in Review
- Effectiveness of AIDS Safer Sex Education for Mentally Ill Male Inpatients
- * VA HIV/AIDS Training Videos

World AIDS Day – December 1, 1993

See article on page 9.

Director's Corner

By B. Peterson

The end of the fiscal year brings the reminder that data from the HIV Registry will soon be used in the RPM process. All entries made in the Registry will be credited to your facility for budget planning and allocation purposes within the next month or so. Again, if you are using the Registry on a routine basis, there will be no additional work to meet this data need. If you are not using the Registry on a routine basis, all patients who received care during FY 1993 should be entered by category of disease.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) is implementing a new adult HIV/AIDS case surveillance form. The new form is called the "Adult HIV/AIDS Confidential Case Report" and will replace the "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome- AIDS Adult Confidential Case Report" form. States vary in their reporting requirements of HIV infected patients, that is, not all states require case reports and some require anonymous reporting only. However, please bear in mind that the same conditions required for reporting AIDS cases apply to HIV infected as well. To release personal identifying information, the state

must have a law requiring reports on HIV infected persons, must have a sanction for failure to report such cases and must make a written request to the medical center for reports. If you are not certain about reporting in your particular state, please contact your Chief or Assistant Chief of MAS.

A DHCP computer program or patch will be developed to print the new CDCP form. Since there are several areas on the form that cannot be completed, either for reasons of confidentiality or because it is not a function of the reporting facility, the program will bypass entry for those data fields or sections of information. This program will not be available for several months. In the interim, if the conditions for reporting HIV infected cases are met, please let your state officials know that our computer program will be modified to accommodate the new form but will not be immediately available.

If you have not already heard, you will be interested to know that we will discontinue reporting of AIDS cases to VA Central Office via the computer generated form at the end of the calendar year. Please continue to report cases via this means until then. We will issue a Directive which will address the issues of reporting

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special cases when your test results may be given to someone outside the VA.

The most common special cases are:

- Positive test results may be given to the local or state public health department. The reason for this is to help public health doctors understand what is happening in the spread of the virus. The only way they can understand is to collect information on the people who have the virus.
- If you are positive and do not want to tell your spouse or sex partners, your doctor or counselor can tell them for their protection. If this bothers you, talk with your doctor or counselor before you are tested.

IF MY TEST IS POSITIVE, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

First, talk with your doctor or counselor. Anyone who has the test should have a follow-up appointment with the doctor or counselor to discuss the results of the test. These people are there to help you and to answer any questions you might have. Second, because you can spread the virus to other people, there are some things you should not do:

- **Do not** have sex without using protection, that is a condom (rubber) and spermicidal jelly
- **Do not** give blood, organs or sperm
- **Do not** share drug needles and syringes

IF MY TEST IS POSITIVE, SHOULD I TELL ANYBODY?

You must decide. You should tell your spouse or sexual partners to protect them. They may want to be tested just as you have been tested. You should know that your doctor or counselor will be concerned about protecting the health of your spouse or sex partners.

Your doctor or counselor will ask you if you have told these people. If you will not or cannot tell your spouse or sexual partners, the doctor or counselor can help you. Remember, he or she can tell your spouse or sex partners if you do not tell them yourself. Telling anybody else is up to you. It helps to tell anyone who is taking care of you like your dentist or another doctor. Friends or other people in your neighborhood or at work do not have to keep that information confidential. Telling them could lead to discrimination. Not everyone understands the facts about HIV infection or AIDS. Other than your spouse or sex partners, you know best whom you can tell.

WHAT IF I DON'T WANT TO TAKE THE TEST? CAN I STILL GET HELP IN THE VA?

Yes. You may refuse to take the test and still get care. Just know why you are going to be tested or why you do not want to be tested.

WHY SHOULD I WANT TO KNOW IF I HAVE THE VIRUS?

First, knowing if you have the virus will help your doctor take care of you. There are medicines which help people who are positive and which help people who have AIDS.

Second, if you are positive, you should know how to keep from passing the virus to others.

Third, if you are positive, you should know what to look for so you can get help as early as possible. Your chances for the treatment that is best for you are better.

Fourth, if you are negative, you should still know how to protect yourself.

AIDS

HIV
Testing
in the
VA

What you need to know

WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS is a disease caused by a virus called the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). This virus kills cells in your body that help fight diseases. When these cells are killed, you can get other diseases like rare infections, pneumonias and cancers. These diseases can kill you.

HOW WOULD I GET AIDS?

AIDS is infectious. That means the virus that causes AIDS, the HIV, can be passed to you from other people but only in special ways. The virus lives in the blood, vaginal secretions or semen of infected people. The main ways the virus passes from one person to another are:

- by having sex with someone who has the virus
- by sharing needles and syringes
- from a pregnant mother who has the virus to her baby

There is a small chance the virus can be passed through a blood transfusion. This happens only when a person who has the virus gives blood.

WHAT DOES "HIGH RISK FOR AIDS" MEAN?

Some of the ways you act are called risky because of the way the virus passes from one person to another. High risk means you are acting in one or more ways that help pass the virus between people.

High risk ways of acting are to:

- have sex with people you don't know
- have sex with many different people or with people who have sex with many other people, such as prostitutes
- have anal sex
- have sex with someone who shoots drugs or has anal sex with someone else
- share drug needles and syringes
- have sex without using protection like condoms (rubbers) and spermicidal jelly

HOW CAN I FIND OUT IF I HAVE THE AIDS VIRUS?

The only way you can find out if you have the virus is to be tested. In the VA, your doctor has to order the test for you and will ask you if you would agree to testing. You may also ask for the test.

WHEN SHOULD I THINK ABOUT HAVING THE TEST?

You should think about having the test if you or your sex partner are acting in one or more ways that put you at high risk. Sometimes your doctor will ask you to be tested. If you are sick the test will help to find out why.

DO I HAVE TO HAVE THE TEST?

No. Testing in the VA is voluntary. You must decide if you want to be tested. To help you decide, you must know what testing means. You must talk with a doctor or a counselor before you decide. They will answer any of your questions or tell you who can answer your questions. If you decide to be tested, you must sign a form called a consent form. This consent form says you understand about the testing and what it means. Do not sign the form until you do understand.

WHAT IS AN AIDS TEST?

The AIDS test is really a blood test for the virus that causes AIDS. It is not a test for the disease called AIDS. The test for the virus (HIV) is done by taking a blood sample from your arm. The blood is tested for a special marker that usually is in the blood only when a person has the virus. This marker is called an antibody. The marker may take up to 3 months to appear in the blood once you have the virus. The time between getting the virus until the marker is in the blood is called the "window" period. If the marker is in your blood on the first test, the test will be done again. If the marker is found a second time, a different test

will be done. The same tube of blood will be used for all three tests. Three tests are done to be sure you really do have the virus.

IS THE TEST FOOLPROOF?

No. In a very small number of people, the test may show the marker when you do not have the virus. But, the test alone will not be used to tell if you have the virus. Your doctor will use it to help decide if you are infected.

WHAT DO THE TEST RESULTS MEAN?

If the marker is not found in the blood, the test is called negative. People call this "HIV negative" or "HIV-". Sometimes tests are negative when people really do have the virus. This is because a person could have the virus but the blood hasn't had time to build up the marker. It is the "window period" of the test. If you are at high risk, your doctor or counselor may suggest testing again at a later time. If all three blood tests show the marker for the virus, the test will be called positive. People call this "HIV positive" or "HIV+". A positive test means you are infected with the virus that causes AIDS. It does not mean you have AIDS unless you are sick with one of the rare infections, pneumonias, or cancers seen in AIDS. Many people are HIV positive but are not sick. Doctors still aren't sure if all people who are HIV positive will get AIDS. You and your doctor must talk about what the test means in your case.

WHO WILL KNOW IF I TAKE THE TEST?

Your doctor and the people who are taking care of you at the VA will know if you take the test. The test results will be in your medical record. The test for the virus and the results (positive or negative) are given special protection in the VA. This special protection means that the test and results will not be given to anyone outside the VA unless you agree to it in writing, except in special cases. You need to know the

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The Best Care.



The Best Career.

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A chance to be the best.

*Keeping the Promise
to Those Who Served*

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