AIDS in Seattle

Public Health Efforts



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AIDS case is diagnosed in Seattle

Local diagnosis brings increased concern, queries

by ROBIN EVANS

Half of the men who showed up at the Seattle Gay Clinic last Saturday for routine STD examinations asked about AIDS. That is an acronym, becoming uncomfortably familiar to gay men throughout the country, for a condition called acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in which the body's ability to fight off infections is severely impaired.

AIDS affects mostly gay men and, although it isn't a great threat to health in itself, disposes its victims to diseases that are deadly.

What worried the men at the clinic Saturday, according to volunteers, was a report, carried on the front page of the *Seattle Times* on Friday, November 12, that the first positive diagnosis of AIDS in a man living in Seattle had been made.

What worries volunteers at the clinic, according to Tim Burak, one of the volunteers, is that there are so few answers to any of the questions about AIDS.

Burak said that the staff of the clinic has been keeping close track of both the growing medical literature on AIDS and reports in the gay press — especially in New York where almost half of the reported AIDS cases are concentrated — of the alarm of gay men faced with an unknown threat. "We're all gay men who have to go through those same fears ourselves," Burak said. "We're talking about coming up with a response [to patient's questions] which will be as sex-positive as it can possibly be, in order to keep a climate of fear from happening, a response that will allow men to make choices based upon their own judgement of their risk, rather than upon what someone else tells them to do.

A local gay bartender, who was asked to listen for comments about AIDS after the *Times* and then, on Saturday, the *P.I.* had printed stories about the Seattle case, said a few days later, that he had been surprised by the sudden interest in the topic. "Most people seem to be saying that it won't change their sex patterns much but that they'll be more careful by taking vitamins and things to bolster their resistance."

Dr. Tim Smith is an internist at a local practice whose clietele includes a large number of gay men. He said he has been surprised that there are still many gay men in Seattle who do not know about AIDS. But Smith said that is changing. He said his practice is getting more calls each day from men who want to know more about the disease or who are afraid that they may have AIDS.

None of the men examined by Smith and his colleagues have shown the full-blown symptoms of AIDS, but Smith said at least 50 men with chronic swelling of the lymph nodes — a condition thought to be closely ralated to AIDS.

Tim Burak, of the gay clinic, said he worries that some men are waiting too long before they get checkups. Although the clinic cannot provide the sort of testing needed to detect AIDS, its volunteers can, Burak said, give guidance and refer clients to sympathetic doctors. He said people have to ask questions and seek out medical help if they are worried they may have the disease. Overreaction is better, he said, than hiding fear.

Guesses are still only answer to meaning of case

by ROBIN EVANS

Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) has been diagnosed in a gay man who lived in Seattle. Reports of the diagnosis appeared last week in both local dailies and on several broadcast stations.

Some of the reports indicated that the man diagnosed with the syndrome may have been little more than a visitor in Seattle. But according to Dr. Hunter Handsfield of the Seattle/King County health department, who monitors AIDS-related diseases here for the federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC)in Atlanta, that indication is wrong.

The man was a long-time resident of Seattle, who, at one point moved to San Francisco. For three or four years before he got sick, Handsfield said, he man was a resident of both cities, traveling frequently between the two.

Reports of AIDS have been clustered in several cities. The latest report by the CDC showed that, of a total 716 cases, 369 had been reported in the greater New York area. From San Francisco, 98 cases of AIDS resulting in 27 deaths so far had been reported to CDC as of November 12. Los Angeles, with 45 cases, Miami, Houston, and Chicago, were the only other cities where more than ten cases had been reported. New cases of AIDS are reported to CDC at a rate of about two a day. 284 of those with the disease had died when the current figures were compiled.

Because the syndrome cuases a profound suppression of the body's immune system, leaving it unable to fight off infections, AIDS — through other diseases — is eventually fatal in almost all cases.

Three-quarters of those who have become sick with AIDS have been gay men. According to Dr. Robert Johnson of CDC's AIDS task force, the number of cases being reported among gay men is increasing at a high rate while the rate of increase among other groups — mainly non-gay i-v drug users — is decreasing.

Does a diagnosis of AIDS in Seattle mean more such cases are likely?

As in any question about AIDS, it is impossible to get a clear answer. Medical researchers still know nothing about the cause, mode of transmission, or cure of the syndrome. All they can do is say "I don't know," or make an educated guess.

Dr. Handsfield who is director of the sexually transmitted disease program at Harborview and a UW associate professor of medicine, is willing to do both. He is conducting a study funded by the National Institutes of Health on a condition called lymphadenopothy which is often thought to be closely related to AIDS. The long word refers to a swelling of the lymph glands.

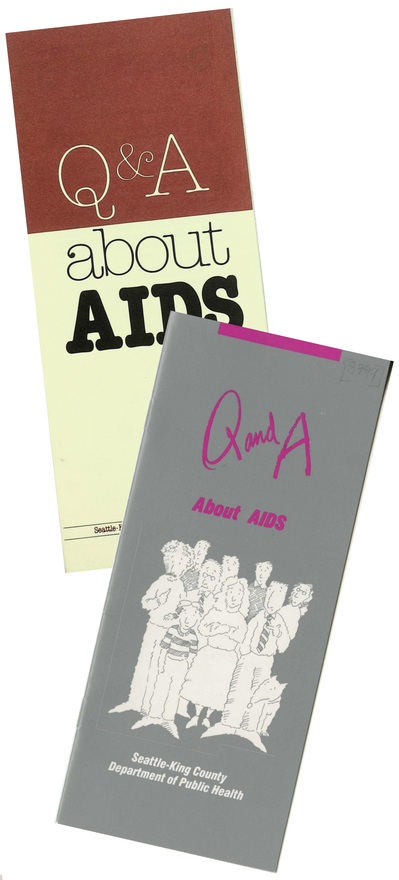
Handsfield said he and his staff are in a unique position to study the relation of AIDS and unexplained lymph gland swelling because, so far, while the gland condition is relatively common (affecting a small but larger than would normally be expected group) among gay men in Seattle, there have been very few actual cases of AIDS. Elsewhere, he said, the two conditions overlap.

That could be bad news for gay men here, he pointed out, but, because so little is known about the causes of either condition, its impossible to say for sure.

Handsfield said that he can, at this point, do nothing but make an educated

The Seattle-King County Department of Public Health (SKCDPH) had the "most well-funded and coordinated response to the AIDS epidemic of any municipal public health department in the 1980s." As a "second-wave" city, Seattle benefited from knowing about AIDS from the experiences of San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles. A year before the first AIDS diagnosis, the city's gay community working through the Seattle Gay Clinic, had begun working with SKCDPH in anticipation of the coming crisis.

"By the end of 1985, the Seattle AIDS Network (SAN) organized representatives from a growing number of community organizations providing services to people with AIDS, gay community organizations, private hospitals, health organizations, SKCDPH, and DSHS [Washington State Department of Social and Health Services]." The coordination of activities between governmental agencies, health facilities and community organizations such as the Northwest AIDS Foundation allow the region to more "effectively combat AIDS than most parts of the country."





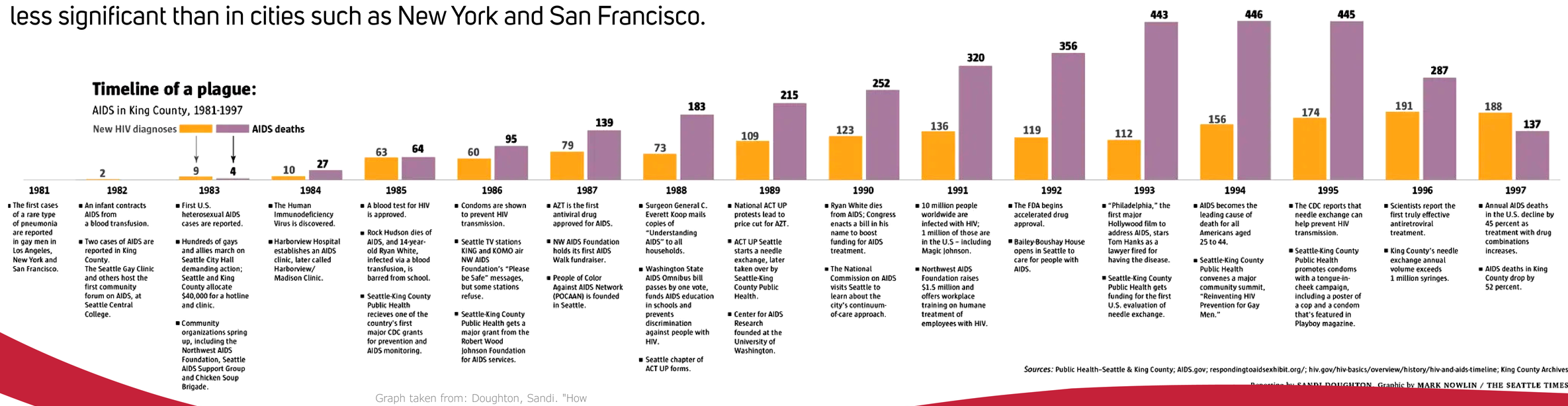
In 1986, SKCDPH AIDS Prevention Project (APP) partnered with the Northwest AIDS Foundation to produce the "Safety Pin, part of the "Please Be Safe"/"Rules of the Road" campaign, symbolizing that the wearer believed in and practiced safe sex. The ads appeared in the *Seattle Gay News*.

Later campaigns became a bit more explicit and focused beyond the gay community.



In 1986, the Seattle-King County Department of Public Health received a grant from the CDC to become one of the nation's first AIDS Prevention Demonstration Projects. Initially focusing on providing information about AIDS through community meetings, press releases, newspaper interviews, and recorded telephone information, the Department eventually set up an AIDS information hotline at Public Health's STD Clinic located at Harborview Hospital. The Department's AIDS Prevention Project would come to serve as a model for public health agencies across the nation, and it informed responses to future public health crises. The spread of HIV/AIDS in King County would be less significant than in cities such as New York and San Francisco.

> *"Seattle and King County were among the earliest jurisdictions in the country to provide public funding for an AIDS response. With ties to STD research at the University of Washington, and with staff who were active in community LGBT and AIDS support and advocacy groups, the AIDS Prevention Project became a national model through its innovative programs in HIV/AIDS education, prevention, research, housing, and support for quality care."*
>
> *Carol Shenk, former King County Archivist,*
> *AIDS Prevention Project: An Oral History and Online Archive*



Graph taken from: Doughton, Sandi. "How Seattle Fought the Plague of AIDS." *Seattle Times*, 7 March 2019.