

Blind panic over AIDS

AIDS panic is coursing through New York's sexually active population. Just recently, Mayor Koch made a public plea for all single New Yorkers to practise abstinence, adding that no sex was really safe. His words were magnified by the U.S. surgeon general who called AIDS, "the new Black Death": Quite a claim when you consider it killed one-third of Europe.

And doctors at an AIDS conference guessed that one American in 30 is now infected with the AIDS virus.

New Yorkers, who are obsessive, neurotic and manic at the best of times, are reacting with predictable confusion and terror to endless media horror stories about AIDS. It's like Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*. Recreational sex has suddenly become unavailable. Women are now saying that they won't go to bed with anyone until Mr. Right comes along, bringing us full circle back to the prudish days of the 1950s.

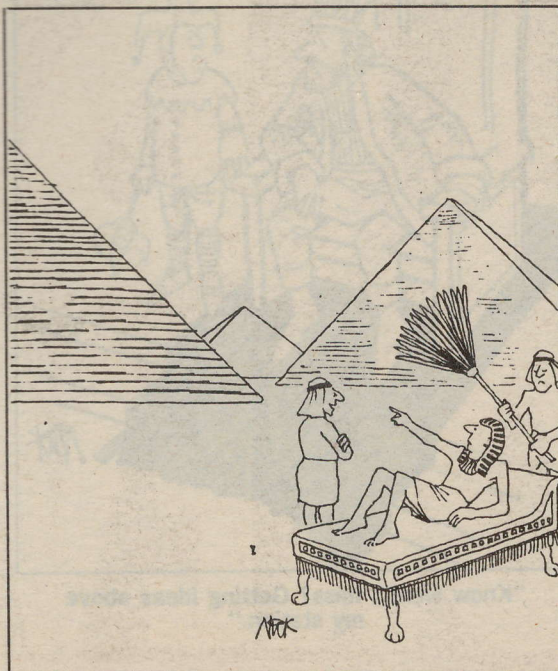
Scary, to be sure, but a few calm observations are now in order. Leave aside the media hype and look at the statistics. They tell a rather different story.

New York is the AIDS capital of the U.S., with 30% of the nation's cases. By 1991, the city will have an estimated 40,000 victims. Today, some 500,000 New Yorkers are said to be infected with the AIDS virus but are as yet still healthy.

So far, so bad. Fifty per cent of gay men in New York and 60% of intravenous drug users test positive for AIDS. These two groups make up 90% of current AIDS cases. Eight per cent of the victims got AIDS from blood transfusions.

Now, the most interesting statistics. The remaining 2% of AIDS cases acquired the disease from heterosexual contact. Only 2% of these cases involved transmission from women to men. And

Punch



"Sorry majesty, the tomb's not in that one. Try again."

ERIC MARGOLIS



80% of infected heterosexuals are black.

These figures hold very important news. The AIDS epidemic has gone on in New York for 10 years. Even so, it does not seem to have broken out into the heterosexual community but has remained confined to the gay community and IV drug users.

Recent findings in Britain strongly suggest that four people out of five have a natural resistance against AIDS. One out of five humans have a genetic susceptibility to AIDS, a predisposition particularly common among blacks.

This, and the general level of poor health and depressed immune systems, is probably why AIDS is rampant in Africa among heterosexuals.

Such facts will surely make black rights groups and self-appointed human rights activists howl, but there is simply no denying the facts. In the U.S. nationally, 25% of all AIDS cases are blacks, though they make up only 12% of the population. Most tragic, 60% of all babies born with AIDS are black.

What all these figures mean is that AIDS remains largely confined within the high risk groups of gays, bisexuals, IV users and urban black ghetto dwellers. Despite scare stories and panic, AIDS has not yet broken out into the general heterosexual population. There is even now a growing hope that this frightful scourge may not become a pandemic, as predicted by so many alarmists.

Fear that infected heterosexuals will spread it to their partners who will, in turn, spread AIDS to others, appears, so far, unfounded. The head of the New York Public Health Department was quoted as saying that he had never seen such a case. In fact, casual sex appears to be safer than monogamy, since AIDS seems to be caught from spouses or live-in loved ones.

Panic mongers won't likely listen to these sobering statistics. Prudes and religious bigots will still claim that AIDS victims are being punished by God for their sins and must be locked away to die in leper colonies. The media will continue to terrorize the public, while cheerfully ignoring such dangers as hepatitis and that leading killer of North Americans, saturated fat.

Celibacy is not the answer, and certainly not panic. Rather, prudence and intense research. Doctors still don't know much about AIDS; it may mutate faster than we can understand it. Still, viral epidemics have a way of abating, just as humans quickly build resistance to new viruses.

For the average heterosexual: Avoid high-risk groups, use condoms and keep your immune system healthy. The risk for such people, even in New York, is estimated by one leading health authority there as essentially zero. For those caught so tragically in high-risk groups, we must pray for a speedy remedy and treat them with compassion, not medieval cruelty.