

AIDS paranoia

by Billy Russo

Anger and fear cloud the issues surrounding the "viral terror," as the presence of the AIDS virus becomes an issue in Roseburg. And these emotions are being fueled by our age-old nemesis, homophobia.

At the December Winston-Dillard school board meeting a local doctor expressed his concern about the AIDS epidemic. According to the *News-Review*, Roseburg's daily paper, Dr. Dan Harper recommended people with AIDS be treated "like lepers." Harper went on to say that the "Communicable Dis-



The Roseburg Report

ease Center" (sic) predicts that within five years, one-third of the world's population will have the dreaded disease."

In a telephone conversation with the good doctor he stated to me that he feels an Old

Testament solution is in order. He wouldn't elaborate, but he said that he feels the government is covering up the true dangers of this medical condition to prevent a brutal witchhunt against homosexuals and that the "disease" is far more transmissible than the government is reporting. He bases his claims on an article he read in *Time Magazine*.

That same month a native Oregonian was involved in a one car accident ten miles south of town. An ambulance was dispatched from Winston-Dillard Fire and Rescue. Once the man was inside the emergency vehicle he informed the paramedics that he had had a positive reaction to the antibody test. The attendants put on rubber gloves and continued their routine procedures. Nothing else was said.

At Douglas Community Hospital the man also informed the Emergency Room staff. They also conducted themselves professionally. According to the accident victim, he didn't have any problems until it came time for x-rays. He said that an administrator appeared on the scene and after a few words from her the rebellious technicians x-rayed his broken bones.

The following week his employment was terminated. His ex-boss asked why he hadn't told her that he was an "AIDS carrier." And his employer was not the only one notified. That same day someone called the *News-Review* and said that Winston-Dillard had treated a man with AIDS. Roseburg's daily is pursuing the story.

Unbeknownst to most, the virus has been in Roseburg for a number of years. In 1980 a man who grew up here returned to Roseburg after living in the Castro district for over a decade. He came home to a loving family, looking for healing.

During 1979 he contracted strep throat seven times. He lost a lot of weight and experienced drenching night sweats. He was always short of breath and tired. He also was

plagued by intestinal parasites, herpes and warts. Suspecting cytomegalovirus (CMV) his doctor sent him to UC Medical Center where he underwent extensive testing for GRID, Gay Related Immune Deficiency. GRID was eventually renamed AIDS.

The tests were inconclusive. Frightened and confused, he returned to his family in Douglas County. Eventually the symptoms completely disappeared and his health returned. He recently took the "test." And yes, he carries the antibody to the suspected AIDS virus.

Another native of this area had a similar experience in 1982 while in the Navy. At that time the medical profession was testing for inverted "T-cell" ratios to determine the presence of AIDS. His T-cell count was down. He also changed his life-style. And eventually his T-cell ratio, and his health, returned to normal.

Dr. Sharon Thrall, Douglas County's Public Health Officer, recently announced that 12 people have been tested locally, and three homosexual men had positive reactions to the antibody. Fearing a lack of confidentiality a number of locals have traveled to Eugene and Portland for the test where they used a pseudonym. There are also men in this community experiencing AIDS-like symptoms: palpable superficial lymph nodes, persistent flu-like symptoms and/or thrush. While they fearfully wade through the mountains of misinformation, they are bombarded by careless homophobic AIDS coverage from the media and insensitive homophobic remarks from their peers.

Currently I know of one Person With AIDS (PWA) living in the Roseburg area. He stays away from almost everyone. His doctor is in a metropolitan area and he commutes hundreds of miles when in need of treatment. I fear that he's not the only one living like this. And I dread the day when he, or another PWA, needs immediate medical attention and is

forced to go to a local hospital.

Although the community has been supportive as a whole, there are those who get caught up in their fears. One couple asks other women who associate with gay men to bring their own tea cup when visiting. Others simply don't want to be touched by male homosexuals. And at least one woman feels that people who test positive to the suspected AIDS virus should be thusly labeled: she's angry because she knows the man in the automobile accident and would have treated him differently had she known he tested positive. Indications are that many men are similarly misinformed. But men being men, they are not as vocal about their feelings.

My own homophobic reaction has been to let it be known that I continue to be affectionate with my brothers who have been exposed to the virus. If that makes some uncomfortable, they can choose to avoid me. That's fine. I respect their space. But to me, it's homophobia.

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