by Michael Helquist

(NEW YORK)

The American response to the AIDS epidemic has moved into a new phase of awareness and concern, according to speakers at a conference held in New York last month, and government officials must assume more responsibility in AIDS public policy issues. Several health experts targeted the expense of AIDS medical care as the most vexing problem; they advised that only the federal government can bring about the changes required to provide adequate health care.

Gay commentators at the two-day forum charged that lesbians and gay men have failed to hold the Reagan administration accountable for its ambivalent approach to funding AIDS research and patient care services.

"In 1986 there is no more pressing an issue for the government to face than AIDS public policy," claimed Philip Lee, MD, director of the Institute of Health Policy Studies at the Universty of California/San Francisco. Lee said AIDS appeared at a time when the federal government had forced the states to assume new responsibilities and increased costs in health care. Yet the states are ill prepared to meet the medical expenses and to develop the necessary AIDS prevention programs. Lee allowed that homophobia kept many state health departments and legislatures from meeting the needs of people with AIDS.

"Cost containment has become the national public health policy," Lee commented. "The discussion about AIDS policies occurs within the context of economic issues rather than one of human services' needs." Lee asserted that the failure of the federal government to assume its responsibilities for funding AIDS programs simply shifts the burden to states, cities, and to people with AIDS themselves.

"A strong federal role is required," Lee noted, "and the most pressing issue is health care financing." Lee, president of the San Francisco Health Commission and a former assistant secretary for the federal Health, Education and Welfare Department (HEW) — since reorganized and named Health and Human Services — said it is critical that the issue of funding AIDS expenses be faced openly at all government levels. Under the current "hodgepodge of financing mechanisms," Lee suggested that New York and other cities will soon be hard pressed to meet AIDS costs. "Where will the money come from to meet these future expenses?" Lee asked. "If it comes at all, it will likely come from the hides of other poor people." He added, "No other country with people with AIDS has the same problems that the United States does because other countries have a more rational system of health care." More than 250 public health officials, hospital administrators, and representatives from major foundations attended the "AIDS and Public Policy" forum held in New York City January 16-18. The forum was sponsored by Dr. Lee's Institute for Health Policy Studies and by the United Hospital Fund, an influential organization involved in public policy questions facing New York City. Michael Grieco, MD, JD, an immunologist and infectious disease expert at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City, told the audience that his hospital had already begun to experience severe financial constraints with its treatment of AIDS patients. The New York hospital has treated 552 poeople with AIDS since the onset of the epidemic.



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rooms for them even now," commented Grieco, "and we expect to have 100 patients by 1987."

Grieco said that a recent study of AIDS patient care at St. Luke's-Roosevelt revealed that only 61 of 552 patients had been seen by a social worker, and there was proportionately less use of dietary services and discharge planning by the AIDS patients. Grieco also noted that one quarter of their AIDS patients had neurological problems, and four out of five exhibited behavior problems; yet only 14 patients had received a psychiatric consultation with a mental health professional. Grieco observed that many of these service problems resulted from lack of reimbursement.

conference, a few of them noted in private that their participation was somewhat perfunctory. Conference organizer Lee has been critical in the past of the failure of American foundations and corporations to finance needed AIDS research.

While the politics of AIDS and acute medical services attracted the most attention from

record. Altman, whose book about AIDS has just been published (AIDS in the Mind of America, Doubleday), noted that the media has undertaken few in-depth reports on the administration's funding of AIDS programs.

Timothy Westmoreland, aide to Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) and assistant counsel to the subcommittee on Health and the Environment, echoed similar complaints about the media.

'We are losing the war against AIDS because the Reagan administration is allowing us to lose and because the media has allowed the government to get away with it," Westmoreland charged. He noted that the media failed to even ask President Reagan anything about AIDS until 1985.

Westmoreland added that the efforts to deal with AIDS are hampered by "the politics of the budget. The epidemic will go up as the dollars go down," he explained.

Both Altman and Westmoreland charged that the gay community had allowed the Reagan Administration to fail to respond. Westmoreland cited "a failure of synthesis of thought" among gay people.

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Westmoreland further noted that gay people who continue to call for AIDS funding while supporting Reagan's military spending "are not paying attention." Altman stated the case more bluntly: "It is time to say tht there is no longer room in the gay political movement for right wing gay people."

While Altman questioned the lack of political leadership in the gay community, he noted that AIDS organizations in major American cities have assumed the most prominent leadership role. "And yet these organizations have moved more into the mainstream; they have become more bureaucratic, and their leaders have fewer insights into movement politics."

"We have 60 AIDS patients hospitalized right now, but we don't have enough private

"We need New York State to reimburse us not only for what we are providing but also for what we should be providing," Grieco asserted. He concluded, "The responsibility to provide care is not the hospital's alone; the commitment must come from the city and state also. The state essentially controls the ability of hospitals to function."

Bruce C. Vladeck, PhD, President of the United Hospital Fund, noted that AIDS public policy questions tend to "get shoved aside" by new advances in medicine and research. However, Peter W. A. Mansell, MD, cancer specialist at M.D. Anderson Hospital in Houston, suggested that the hospital administrators and health officials at the conference had been slow to respond to the problems brought on by AIDS.

"I'm distressed that it's taken this amount of time for a group like this to get together and discuss the issues," Mansell said. "We should have been looking at these problems three years ago."

Although representatives from such major corporations as DuPont, the Rand Corporation, the March of Dimes, Travelers Insurance, and Equitable Life Insurance attended the

the participants at the conference, other sessions dealt with community care services, public school policies, and the impact of AIDS on the blood system.

Challenge to the Gay Community

"The federal government refuses to recognize the gay community as legitimate, and yet it expects gay people to take care of AIDS themselves," charged gay political commentator and author Dennis Altman. Altman called the Reagan administration's response to AIDS "a patchwork of neglect and panic."

"Almost nobody in government is prepared to deal with education," Altman noted. "They are far too scared to be seen as supporting homosexuality and drug use."

Altman, who is Australian, noted that the problem extended beyond the federal government to state and local officials as well. "There is less information about transmission of AIDS in New York than there is in my home city of Melbourne, which has only 19 cases of AIDS."

Altman especially criticized Mayor Edward Koch, who had opened the forum with an aggressive denial that San Francisco had done more about AIDS than had New York. "Don't let the Mayor's lies fool you," warned Altman, "AIDS programs in this city have flourished in spite of the abject failure of City Hall."

Given the government's tardy and inadequate response, Altman questioned why the media and the gay community found it so difficult to criticize the government's track

Congressional aide Westmoreland concluded, "The medical McCarthyites are already gearing up; the politics will only get worse.'

David Rothman, PhD, professor of social medicine at Columbia University, called for coalition building among groups who are "disenfranchised" from adequate health care. Rothman said that the homeless, the elderly, and ex-mental patients as well as people with AIDS are not receiving adequate public health care.

"Moving across boundaries is now very important," Rothman advised.

Although discouraged by the current realities of the American public health system, Dr. Lee said he found some hope in the examples set by people with AIDS and the thousands of volunteers across the country who work in AIDS programs. Lee suggested that "they represent a rebirth of the concept of our community responsibilities as citizens."

Michael Helquist recently received a special Board of Directors Cable Car Award for Outstanding Journalist of the Year. Mr. Helquist lives in San Francisco; his articles appear regularly in Coming Up! and The Advocate.

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