

2002

## American AIDS Fear in the 1980s

Tom R. Scales

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Scales, Tom R. (2002) "American AIDS Fear in the 1980s," *Vulcan Historical Review*. Vol. 6, Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol6/iss2002/5>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

---

## AMERICAN AIDS FEAR IN THE 1980s

---

By Tom R. Scales

By mid-1984, the illness that during the past three years had baffled doctors, killed patients, and frightened many Americans was no longer such a mystery. Doctors had identified the virus that caused it and knew how it was spread, chiefly through blood and semen. It had a name, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and a handy acronym, AIDS. Magazines and newspapers with national circulations had published this information repeatedly. The disease did not, however, have a cure. Readers knew that, too. Local panics about AIDS made the news periodically during the 1980s, even after much of the early fog surrounding the syndrome had dissipated. The media certainly shared some of the blame. Frightening headlines warned that no one was really safe from AIDS. However, calm, reasoned voices in the press refuting this were also readily evident. There seems to be no single, identifiable rationale guiding people who panicked. One can frequently only speculate as to why they did so.

### **Uncommon infections, little notice**

There was no reason to panic at first. The patients who contracted what would later be called AIDS had pretty vague symptoms--fatigue, nausea, diarrhea, odd bumps on the skin. Patients saw nothing to get worked up about. Many gay men, the disease's early victims, considered parasitic diseases and assorted sexually transmitted afflictions simply a lifestyle health hazard. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the growth of the gay liberation movement during the past decade, patrons at bathhouses could find plentiful, and even anonymous, sex. Venereal disease often came with the lifestyle. Many in San Francisco's gay com-

munity considered the city's VD clinic an easy place to get a shot and a date.<sup>1</sup>

Doctors did not immediately realize an epidemic was in progress. AIDS did not kill directly. It let other diseases do that and thus physicians did not see the underlying affliction. But a handful of doctors knew *something* was not right. In 1980, doctors had treated a number of patients with similar and uncommon illnesses. Swollen lymph glands became common. A rare type of pneumonia, *Pneumocystis carinii*, had inexplicably appeared in some patients. Kaposi's sarcoma, a type of skin cancer, rarely showed up other than in Jewish or Italian men in their fifties and sixties. But in 1980 and 1981, doctors diagnosed young gay men with KS.<sup>2</sup>

Doctors at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) began studying the ailments in an attempt to determine a pattern. In early 1982, the hunt for answers continued. "Since October 1981, cases of persistent generalized lymphadenopathy-- not attributable to previously identified causes--among homosexual males have been reported to CDC by physicians in several major metropolitan areas in the United States," CDC researchers wrote in a May 1982 issue of *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, a publication distributed nationally to doctors and clinics. The researchers noted that "virologic and immunologic studies of many of these patients are currently underway."<sup>3</sup> Doctors and researchers were not the only people conscious of the disease. AIDS news made the mainstream press by late December 1981. *Newsweek* printed a story toward the back of an issue. The headline made clear who was believed to be in danger. "Diseases That Plague Gays," it said.<sup>4</sup>

The numbers of patients with these ailments remained small. The CDC had counted 77 cases of KS, 75 cases of *Pneumocystis carinii*, and eighteen patients with both. But researchers noted the high death rate. Sixty percent of the pneumonia patients had died, as had twenty percent with the cancer. Dr. Frederick P. Siegal of New York's Mount Sinai Medical Center



said the cases indicated "a nationwide epidemic of immunodeficiency among male homosexuals."<sup>5</sup>

Some gay men knew before *Newsweek* did that something was killing their friends, but many remained unaware or seemingly unconcerned. By late 1981, the *New York Native*, a gay newspaper in New York City, packed its pages with stories about the rising threat. A fundraiser for "gay cancer" held by activists during the big Labor Day gathering of gays in Fire Island, New York, that year netted just \$124.<sup>6</sup> The *Native* had a circulation of about 20,000. An estimated one million gays lived in New York City, so most did not read about the epidemic.<sup>7</sup> Terror did not grip the souls of gay men in 1981. What exactly should they have feared? Sexual contact was just one possible cause of the disease. Researchers were still investigating poppers, nitrate inhalants popular with the disco crowd. "So far, investigators can only theorize about the cause of the outbreaks," *Newsweek* said.<sup>8</sup>

Homosexuals became frightened in 1982, but heterosexuals did not fear the new contagion that year or the previous year.<sup>9</sup> After all, in early 1982, some scientists were calling it GRID, Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. The name did not quite fit. Doctors had identified the condition in children and heterosexual intravenous drug abusers the year before. Still, it was not a name likely to make straight people flee to the hills.

### **Heterosexual AIDS fear**

Widespread public fear of AIDS struck America in the summer of 1983. An editorial in the May 6, 1983, *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* told of "the possibility" that "routine close contact, as within a family household," could spread AIDS. The news scared the public. It differed sharply from what other medical professionals had said until then. As recently as March, the CDC reported "no person-to-person transmission has been identified other than through intimate contact or blood transfusion."<sup>10</sup>

An informed citizen in early 1983 knew AIDS was not entirely limited to gay men. News articles noted and arguably

played up the fact that it had been found affecting other groups. "A new and deadly disease is coursing through the country, wasting the bodies of victims, incubating in an untold number of others who have yet to show symptoms and triggering one of the most intensive investigations in medical history," *Newsweek* announced in an April cover story. The magazine continued:

And although gay men still account for 72 percent of cases, AIDS seems to be moving into the population at large. First intravenous drug users of both sexes, then Haitians, and more recently the sex partners and children of both groups have been afflicted. Hemophiliacs and at least one recipient of a routine blood transfusion have also been stricken.<sup>11</sup>

The facts were accurate, but the article's tone contained a "Could the next victim be *you*?" quality. It is debatable whether the "population at large" consisted of Haitians, drug abusers, or people who had sex with Haitians and drug abusers.<sup>12</sup> Only on the last of the article's five pages did a virologist point out the limited ways AIDS was transmitted and that one could "not get AIDS from toilet seats or eating in restaurants."<sup>13</sup>

Having been informed by such stories, the American populace was primed for terror when the press picked up on the *JAMA* editorial on contracting AIDS through routine contact. The *New York Times* declared, "Mere Contact May Spread AIDS." Geraldo Rivera told viewers of ABC's *20/20* about "a steadily growing fear that the nation's entire blood supply may be threatened by AIDS" and said "the safest thing to do is store up your own blood."<sup>14</sup>

Alarmed Americans reacted in a variety of ways. Blood donations dropped 16.4 percent because donors feared getting AIDS. Beverly Hills women told each other not to kiss their hairdressers. The New York State Funeral Directors Association recommended that its members refuse to embalm AIDS victims until guidelines for handling the bodies were established. A San Francisco television station planned to air a show, "Demystifying



AIDS." The two AIDS patients scheduled to appear on the show were interviewed by telephone instead when cameramen and sound technicians balked at being in the same room with them.<sup>15</sup> A New York City bank robber exploited the fear by handing a teller a note reading, "I have AIDS and I have less than 30 days to live." The teller, frightened of catching AIDS by touching the note, gave him the money. A teller at another bank laughed and the robber left empty-handed. The thief did not have AIDS, but before police caught him in August, he had robbed ten banks of a total of \$18,000. An AIDS hotline run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services received between 10,000 and 13,000 callers per day.<sup>16</sup>

Even as alarming news reports about AIDS reached the public, health officials and some news organizations tried to stem the panic. Dr. Donald Armstrong, head of infectious disease treatment at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, said AIDS was "one of the least infectious contagious diseases I have seen."<sup>17</sup> In Atlanta, callers jammed the telephone lines at the Centers for Disease Control. "It seemed the CDC doctors were always on the phone with one or another local health official, or delivering the same old reassurances to the reporters. Later, dispirited AIDS staffers at the CDC complained they spent more time in July 1983 controlling AIDS hysteria than controlling AIDS."<sup>18</sup>

Questionable information triggered the panic. Of eight children in the May *JAMA* report, at least six had parents in high-risk groups for contracting AIDS. One had Haitian parents and five had parents who were intravenous drug abusers. Another child had a mother who emigrated three years before from the Dominican Republic. The researchers said their observations supported a hypothesis that an "infectious agent" caused AIDS, that sex or drug abuse were not required to get it, and that the disease could be transmitted to an otherwise normal host.<sup>19</sup>

The scare of summer 1983 contained elements common to later panics and, by perpetuating the idea that AIDS was easy to contract, may have contributed to those panics. A fear of easy

transmission manifested itself in subsequent protests over whether children infected with the AIDS virus but who had not contracted the disease should be allowed in public schools. The fear, when it resulted in picket lines or other attention-getting behavior, does not seem to have been abated by greater understanding of the disease. Researchers identified the virus that caused AIDS in 1984. Medical science became more certain of how the disease was and was not spread. Yet, frightened Americans lashed out sporadically during the rest of the 1980s as they discovered AIDS carriers in their towns. When such outbursts occurred, medical authorities and editorial writers pleaded for calm and repeated that one could not get AIDS just by being in the same room as someone with the virus. Some magazine articles and television shows that urged calm also ominously warned of the mysterious nature of AIDS and how difficult it was to stay completely safe from it.

Past outbreaks of other diseases had also caused panics. During the world-wide influenza epidemic of 1918-19, nurses making house calls in Philadelphia were both swamped by flu victims who wanted help and spurned by passers-by fearful of catching the disease. A cholera epidemic in Hungary in 1831 ignited a bloody revolt by peasants who blamed the disease on a plot against them by the aristocracy.<sup>20</sup>

### **Fears: Mid-1980s**

In the summer of 1985, the identity of one AIDS victim shocked many Americans. Movie star Rock Hudson announced that he had AIDS, and the press revealed he was gay. Rock Hudson, the handsome, masculine guy who wooed Doris Day in 1959's *Pillow Talk*? That Rock Hudson? He provided a famous public face for a disease that began in a community still considered by many as outside the American mainstream. Newspapers across the nation leaped to print AIDS stories the Sunday after the news broke.<sup>21</sup>

Fear levels did not correlate with medical strides against AIDS. Scientists made progress against the spread of the malady



in 1985, but many people remained afraid. Such fear survived regardless of what scientists and the media had for more than a year said were the limited ways one could catch the disease. In August, federal health authorities announced that a new test successfully screened AIDS-infected blood from America's blood supply.<sup>22</sup> The same month, the *New York Times* observed a swelling fright among heterosexuals. "Fear of AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, has become a kind of disease in itself," the newspaper said. "The anxiety has grown despite the repeated assertions by public-health officials that AIDS is transmitted only through intimate sexual contact or from contaminated needles or other contacts with the blood of infected people."<sup>23</sup> Citizens in Queens planned to block the housing of homeless AIDS patients in a nursing home.<sup>24</sup> School leaders in Kokomo, Indiana, kept Ryan White, a thirteen-year-old AIDS patient, from attending middle school.<sup>25</sup> A seven-year-old girl diagnosed with AIDS prompted a boycott involving as many as 18,000 children when New York City public school officials let her attend second grade. School officials had considered whether she might bite other children, spreading the disease. A September *New York Times/CBS News* poll revealed that almost half of the respondents believed they could contract AIDS by sharing a glass with a patient. Nearly a third of those surveyed feared virus-infested toilet seats.<sup>26</sup> An Atlanta man reportedly blasted the air with bug spray, hoping to kill any mosquitoes that feasted on guests at a gay neighbor's barbecue.<sup>27</sup>

The editors at *The New Republic* decried such behavior. In an October 1985 editorial, they said a new epidemic, Acute Fear Regarding AIDS, AFRAIDS, had struck more than 100 million people. The editors blasted a *Life* magazine cover from July that declared in large red letters, "NOW NO ONE IS SAFE FROM AIDS." The article, *The New Republic* noted, confirmed only that unsafe people were those who had sex with AIDS carriers or had a transfusion of infected blood.<sup>28</sup>



### **The Koop Report**

A U.S. Surgeon General's report fueled more AIDS-related headlines beginning in late 1986 and continuing into 1987. The report released in October 1986 did not reveal much new information or advance unheard-of recommendations; researchers had repeatedly described how the AIDS virus traveled and had urged the use of condoms as protection for years. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop simply added weight. When a Health and Human Services doctor talked about AIDS, maybe people listened. But the proclamation from the Surgeon General of the United States had a clear authority. The recommendations were unusually frank for government warnings. Suddenly condoms entered public conversation. There is a chance, however, that a plan to educate people needlessly scared them instead. Koop's intent to mail an informative brochure about AIDS to all American households seemed to suggest that everyone stood an equal chance of getting AIDS when they did not.

### **1987: The Fear Continues**

If one were to remove the date from a news story about an AIDS panic in 1987, one would find little to distinguish the actions and anxieties described from a panic in 1985, or in 1983. The disease had not strayed much beyond the high-risk groups in 1987, but some media reports indicated that not everyone knew this. Other reports seemed meant to frighten their readers and audiences. In January, *U.S. News & World Report*, in a story headlined, "AIDS: At the Dawn of Fear," announced that 220 people would die of AIDS in the next week, "and 374 more--28 of them heterosexuals--will be infected with the killer virus."<sup>29</sup>

Like in many AIDS stories of recent years, the text was factually correct but did not seem intended to reassure:

The known truths are awful enough. If you get it, you die--though not right away. Even if you are "straight" and monogamous now, you are not necessarily safe. Because AIDS has a long and indeterminate incubation period, you and

your partner can carry it and spread it around with perfect innocence, perhaps for more than 10 years.<sup>30</sup>

Two weeks later, popular television talk show host Oprah Winfrey said, "one in five heterosexuals could be dead from AIDS by the end of the next three years. That's by 1990. One in five."<sup>31</sup> In August, someone burned the house of three boys in Arcadia, Florida, who were hemophiliac carriers of the AIDS-virus.<sup>32</sup> Some doctors reportedly refused to treat patients with AIDS, though exactly how many did so remained unclear.<sup>33</sup>

In October, *U.S. News & World Report* published a nine-page story about Steve Forrest, an AIDS victim who moved from Dallas back to his home in West Virginia. Few of his relatives would see him. Customers began drifting away from the local McDonald's. As many as fifteen callers per day, began saying they had heard the AIDS patient worked there. Forrest's sister, Liz, learned AIDS could only be spread through fluids like semen or blood. "But when Liz tried to enlighten her relatives," the magazine reported, "she found it impossible to penetrate the blend of half-remembered television shows, magazine articles and hearsay that served the family as gospel on the subject." People changed seats in bars to escape him. Williamson Mayor Sam Kapourales worried Forrest might infect the town pool through open sores or rectal bleeding. He ordered the pool closed. Some people suspected Forrest of infecting apples at the grocery store.<sup>34</sup>

### Conclusion

In the United States, the fear of AIDS grew and persisted irrespective of scientific knowledge about the disease. Before the first large AIDS panic in 1983, newspapers and magazines had already narrowed the groups most in danger of becoming infected to: Haitians, intravenous drug abusers, gay men, and people who had sex with any member of these groups. In February 1994, scientists discovered the virus that caused AIDS. Doctors knew how the virus moved from person to person. Publications



repeated these facts for the rest of the decade. Every now and then, The Fear would make itself known somewhere in America.

The Fear resulted partly from ignorance. Accurate information about AIDS abounded in the public domain after 1982. It persisted also because it was such a tempting story-- an incurable disease and its seeming penetration of sanctuaries: No one was safe. Headlines frequently suggested a grimmer picture than did the stories. Fuzzy language likely contributed to the stubborn fear. The press used the word "exposed" when talking about AIDS. One doctor criticized the term. "When people say, 'expose,' I get the feeling that they think the virus floats around the room like the scent of gardenias, and somehow they get exposed. That's not how it works."<sup>35</sup>

People seem to have panicked or ostracized AIDS victims when the scary virus came close to home, such as when it appeared in their child's classmate, in the suspicion of it at a neighbor's social gathering, or in the gay waiter in a restaurant. News reports from the 1980s do not mention instances of people going to other cities to picket schools with HIV-positive children in them or organizing efforts to close gay-owned businesses. The fearful attitude perhaps sprang from a weighing of costs and benefits. So what if one shook hands with an AIDS patient? People likely knew there was no danger. *But what if*, nagged a voice in the back of one's mind, *the doctors are wrong, or I am some kind of fluke? Is it worth risking my life to shake a hand?* And the hand often remained untouched.

## REFERENCES

---

<sup>1</sup>Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 39.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>3</sup>"Persistent, Generalized Lymphadenopathy Among Homosexual Males," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (May 21, 1982): 249-51.

<sup>4</sup>"Diseases That Plague Gays," *Newsweek* (December 21, 1981), 51.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>6</sup>Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 92.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>8</sup>"Diseases That Plague Gays," *Newsweek* (December 21, 1981), 51-52.

<sup>9</sup>Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 151.

<sup>10</sup>"Prevention of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS): Report of Inter-Agency Recommendations," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (March 4, 1983): 102.

<sup>11</sup>"The AIDS Epidemic: The Search for a Cure," *Newsweek* (April 18, 1983), 74.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Fumento, *The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS: How a Tragedy Has Been Distorted by the Media and Partisan Politics*, (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Gatewa, 1990), 25-28. The CDC identified Haitians as a risk group early in the AIDS epidemic because a noticeable number of early patients were Haitian. As Fumento observes, there were a number of inconclusive theories about why AIDS was so prevalent in Haiti. Doctors speculated about causes ranging from poor sanitation to the use of human blood in voodoo rituals.

<sup>13</sup>"The AIDS Epidemic: The Search for a Cure," *Newsweek* (April 18, 1983), 79.



<sup>14</sup>"The Media and the Scare," *Newsweek* (July 4, 1983), 21.

<sup>15</sup>"The Panic Over AIDS: Fear of the epidemic has caused a backlash that alarms homosexuals and medical experts alike," *Newsweek* (July 4, 1983), 20-21.

<sup>16</sup>Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 351-53.

<sup>17</sup>"The Panic Over AIDS: Fear of the epidemic has caused a backlash that alarms homosexuals and medical experts alike," *Newsweek* (July 4, 1983), 21.

<sup>18</sup>Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 351.

<sup>19</sup>James Oleske, "Immune Deficiency Syndrome in Children," *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, (May 6, 1983): 2345-49.

<sup>20</sup>"Epidemics: A Paralyzing Effect: Society has not dealt well with widespread illness," *Newsweek* (September 23, 1985), 23.

<sup>21</sup>Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 578.

<sup>22</sup>*New York Times*, August 1, 1985.

<sup>23</sup>*New York Times*, August 30, 1985.

<sup>24</sup>*New York Times*, August 1, 1985.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>"AFRAIDS," *The New Republic* (October 14, 1985), 7.

<sup>27</sup>"The AIDS Conflict: Ignorance and uncertainty fuel an epidemic of fear that could be almost as destructive as the disease itself," *Newsweek* (September 23, 1985), 18.

<sup>28</sup>"AFRAIDS," *The New Republic* (October 14, 1985), 8.

<sup>29</sup>"AIDS: At the Dawn of Fear," *U.S. News & World Report* (January 13, 1987), 60-61.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>31</sup>Fumento, *The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS*, 3.

<sup>32</sup>Mary Ellen Voboril, "The Castaways: Fears About AIDS Drive Three Boys From Home," *Life* (October 1987), 98-100.

<sup>33</sup>"Doctors Fear AIDS, Too: Some practitioners -- especially surgeons -- shun people with AIDS," *Newsweek* (August 3, 1987), 58.

<sup>34</sup>"AIDS: When Fear Takes Charge," *U.S. News & Report* (October 12, 1987), 62-70.

<sup>35</sup>Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 542.