

Legislators hear plea on AIDS

DALLAS TIMES HERALD

U.S. official requests help on deadly illness

by Linda Fiblich MAR 27 1987

TIMES HERALD AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop put the battle against AIDS before the Texas Legislature on Thursday, pleading with lawmakers to accept their part in addressing the "grave threat to our national health and well-being."

"You have only begun what appears to be a long and fearful journey," Koop said to a joint session of the Senate and House. "All signs point to this disease being a burden to us for the rest of the century."

Koop's appearance was his second ever before a state legislature. He called on the assembly to participate in "a national dialogue" to solve what he called the most pressing problems: paying research and patient-care costs that soon "will be astronomical" and removing the full burden of patient care from the country's hospitals.

In a news conference later, he backed away from criticizing Texas' failure so far to commit state tax dollars to AIDS programs. "Money alone is not going to solve the problem," he said. "You have to have ideas. But most of all, you have to have coalitions that are willing to work together and get something accomplished."

Koop reacted strongly to a suggestion by Rep. Brad Wright, R-Houston and chairman of the House Committee on Public Health, that since the spread of AIDS has been largely through activities that are illegal under state law, AIDS victims should bear some of their own burden.

"As a public health officer, as a physician, as someone who has practiced the Hippocratic oath for 50 years, I believe that when people are sick we have to take care of them," he said.

Koop normally makes public appearances in the military dress of the U.S. Public Health Service, but Thursday was in a navy blazer, gray slacks and red bow tie. He apologized to legislators, saying that "through the kind offices" of an airline, his uniform was in Memphis.

In a 20-minute speech that relieved the grimness of his message with occasional humor, Koop reiterated the statistics, the projections and the agenda.

To date, the nation has seen 33,000 cases of AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, a viral disorder that destroys the body's ability to fight disease. More than half already have resulted in deaths, and the remainder almost certainly will have the same outcome, he said. In Texas, the case total has been just over 2,100 and the death rate nearly two-thirds.

"We anticipate a cumulative total nationally of more than a quarter of a million reported cases by 1991," he warned. "Your own state epidemiologists predict that some 16,000 will be Texans."