

'You've got a big problem in Texas'

Koop tells lawmakers AIDS funds should be a state priority

HOUSTON CHRONICLE MAR 27 1987

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AUSTIN — Legislative leaders should place a high priority on funding AIDS programs because "people are as important as roads and prisons," state Health Commissioner Robert Bernstein said Thursday.

Bernstein's remarks followed an address in which U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop urged lawmakers to do their part to educate the public about the deadly disease.

"You've got a big problem in Texas," Koop said. "You were one of the first states to get AIDS, and you were among the first states to have people die from AIDS. But AIDS has become everybody's problem. People didn't want to accept that. Now they must."

State health officials estimate that 90,000 Texans are infected with the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome. By the end of 1991 they predict, the number of AIDS cases will reach 16,200 in the state and that 11,000 Texans will have died of the disease.

Despite the state's budget crunch, Bernstein said, his agency needs more money to fund programs for AIDS counseling, education and detection. He said the state's estimated \$4.8 billion revenue shortfall for the

1988-89 biennium "is not my problem."

"Are roads the only thing we should worry about? Are prisons the only thing we should worry about? Is the AIDS problem important enough to get concerned about? That's what the Legislature and the governor have to ask themselves," said Bernstein.

The Texas Department of Health spends about \$1 million a year, mostly in federal money, on AIDS programs. The agency is seeking a budget increase of \$670,000 a year in AIDS funding. Legislation also is being considered to make an additional \$1.5 million a year available for AIDS programs.

Bernstein said the amount of money sought by the health department to battle AIDS pales in comparison to state prison and highway expenditures.

"I just think things in this world change," said Bernstein. "If you're going to deal with a problem like AIDS in a sophisticated and proper way, you have to be able to change your ideas. If we get what we've asked for, Texas will be taking a great and significant step forward."

The AIDS statistics change on a daily basis. The latest figures indicate that 2,067 AIDS cases have been confirmed in Texas with 1,290 deaths reported. In Harris County, 986 AIDS cases and 645 deaths have been re-

corded. Koop said the total number of AIDS cases is expected to increase "ninefold" by 1991 and "twentyfold" among the heterosexual population.

Today, most AIDS victims are homosexuals or drug abusers, but health experts say the disease will continue to spread among heterosexuals and children.

Earlier this week, Rep. Brad Wright, R-Houston, chairman of the House Public Health Committee, remarked that the state's budget crisis would prevent the Legislature from placing a high priority on funding AIDS programs.

Wright also suggested that AIDS victims should take some responsibility for their lifestyles and questioned whether the state should shoulder the health care costs of people who have broken the law. Sodomy is illegal in Texas.

Koop, who predicted the nation's "AIDS bill" will climb to \$16 billion by 1991, took issue with Wright's comments.

"As a public health officer and a physician, I believe when people are sick we have to take care of them," he said. "These are people who have lost their jobs and have no insurance. They are destitute and essentially helpless and hopeless. I don't think anyone can let them sit there in that condition."

There is no known cure for AIDS,

an affliction that destroys the body's immune system, making victims increasingly vulnerable to disease. AIDS is spread through sexual contact, contaminated needles or blood transfusions.

Homosexual men and intravenous drug users have been the disease's main victims, but Koop said those groups "no longer form an exclusive club."

The "best defenses" against AIDS, said Koop, are to abstain from sex or "maintain a safe, monogamous relationship." Koop also encourages the use of condoms for those who "have sex with someone known to engage in high-risk behavior."

"Anything that will cut down on the spread of this disease should be done," he said. "In addition to education, science and morality are the most helpful alternatives."

Koop said children need to be taught at an early age about AIDS.

"The way I like to see it taught is gently and firmly in a non-threatening, non-frightening way starting in kindergarten and bringing them right on up," he said.

"I'd like to see our youngsters approach their life with the thought I'm going to be abstinent until I find mutually, faithful monogamous relationship. I think this is good public health doctrine."