

# The AIDS Apocalypse

ON AUGUST 1 *The Australian* ran a staggering front page banner headline, "AIDS EPIDEMIC COULD RIVAL THE BLACK DEATH". The story told about the virulence of the AIDS virus, which hijacks the cells of the immune system with explosive rapidity — about 1000 times faster than other viruses. Then the bad news: a vaccine would be difficult to find because the virus doesn't copy itself exactly. To knock it out you would need a "smart" vaccine that changed its chemical composition to match the protean flexibility of the AIDS virus. It was this feature of the beast that evoked doomsaying by the experts. British venereologist John Seale compared it with lentiviruses which are so lethal against livestock that nothing can be done but to slaughter infected animals. At the Harvard School of Public Health William Haseltine warned that the virus, new to man, might be as virulent as the bubonic plague, which in the 14th century wiped out one-third of Europe's population.

This, I thought, was social history in the making. Twenty-five years ago the Pill invaded the habits of chastity to produce the sexual revolution. Herpes had taken some of the joy out of sex when it invaded the swinging scene. And now AIDS, which Haseltine speculated might already have infected as many as one million Americans: might it not inaugurate the counter-revolution against promiscuity? I opened an "AIDS-WATCH" file to document the public reaction.

It wasn't long in coming. On

August 7, *The Australian* published letters chastising public health officers in Victoria and New South Wales for misunderstanding and underestimating the AIDS threat. A few days later the letter columns were registering the belief that the era of permissiveness had ended. Ann Kruger wrote from Toowoomba, "Am I naive in the expectation that . . . promiscuity and all that it encompasses will become an activity of the past?" Doreen Dique suggested that the promiscuity of television series heroes was now out-of-date. All writers took the point that "the scytheman cometh". Meanwhile, dispatches tracked the spread of the epidemic over the world.

The Centre for Disease Control in Atlanta reported that AIDS had spread to low-risk females. 25% of the known cases in America were not in the high-risk categories of drug-users, prostitutes, or transfusion-related cases. Epidemiologists were quoted as speculating that the disease was poised on thresholds of breakout from infected populations to previously safe populations. The head of the Sloan-Kittering Cancer Centre, Dr Mathilde Krim, estimated that the disease could spread tenfold in the next three years. In the absence of knowledge of how it was transmitted to low-risk categories, she suggested that the "casualness with which young people engage in sex is very frightening". From Brazil there was a dispatch reporting that AIDS paranoia had gripped the country. Just over 600 cases had been reported in a population estimated to contain

one million persons in the high-risk categories. Homosexuals, transvestites, and prostitutes were said to be disappearing from the streets. Brazil's blood banks had been heavily invaded by AIDS. All haemophiliacs tested for the AIDS antibody were positive, and 65% of homosexuals were also. Horrific stories came in from Africa, where several millions are estimated to be suffering from AIDS, mainly due to widespread use of unsterile needles.

The probable future impact of the AIDS epidemic on legislation can be estimated from events in New South Wales. At the time Haseltine and Seale broke the bad news, Parliament was revising its legislation on sexually-transmitted diseases. On August 7, Professor David Penington, head of the AIDS Task Force, and Pat Rogan, chairman of the Committee on Prostitution, were taking the soft line that the transmission of AIDS by prostitutes should not be an offence. Penington declared that he would not "like to see the introduction of penalties". Rogan appealed to "realism". The public were apprised that "some people still engage in sexual practices when they know they have got the disease". This lawmaker was of the opinion that to punish people for what they were bound to do betrayed epistemological obtuseness ("unrealism"). The Premier, taking cues from Sydney's aggressive homosexual organisations, hailed the breakthrough to "safe sex" — the condom.

The soft line endured just four days. On August 12, the Premier adopted the position of the Opposi-

tion that the transmission of AIDS by prostitutes should be an offence. Rogan put up a last ditch effort on behalf of homosexual prostitutes by saying that criminalisation would be "counter-productive"—of what, he did not say; but he conceded that it might be considered as a last resort. By the month's end, the government had capitulated. The law would provide for fines of up to \$5000 for persons who knowingly transmitted AIDS, and reporting carriers of the disease would be mandatory. In an attempt to distract attention from the true brunt of the law, Mr Wran waved his doctor bogey. Practitioners who failed to report AIDS, he vowed, would get the sack. Nothing more was heard of the condom solution.

Then, on August 16, apocalypse. *The Australian* ran a headline, "EXPERT RECOMMENDS CHASTITY AS ONLY DEFENCE AGAINST AIDS". British immunologist Anthony Pinching declared that chastity was the most effective means of containing the disease. He even recommended that these tidings be taught in sex education courses. He is not reported as having noted that this recommendation reversed the position typical of the medical profession over the past two decades. Previously they had held that chastity was "unrealistic"; the whole purpose of sex education courses was to explain to youths how to have safe sex. It now seemed that safe sex was an elusive commodity. One wondered how the sex industry would be affected by the new realism. Would books like *The Joy of Sex* be required to print on the cover, "Warning: Sex is a Health Hazard"?

The AIDS fallout seems to drift everywhere. From Perth and Sydney there were reports of the psychological effects of the disease. A significant number of patients suffered depression and contemplated or committed suicide. Dr Morris Gollow reported that the first impulse of freshly diagnosed AIDS patients was to cut their throats; their second impulse was to cut the throats of their lovers. Professor Penington, ever the man for rainbows, proposed psychiatric counselling services. They could not be more than a bandaid because certain death was not the object of

greatest dread. Much worse was the social isolation that gripped patients as friends and acquaintances withdrew from fear of infection. Demonstrations of this reaction were vivid. In the waiting room of a Brisbane hospital, a woman visitor forcibly expelled three homosexual youths and demanded that their seats be sterilised. In Gosford the plight of a 3-year-old AIDS victim was shown to the nation on *Sixty Minutes*. Her parents wished her to enjoy normal pre-school attendance, but parents, and the local authorities, wanted her in quarantine. The same painful scenario played out elsewhere.

In Indianapolis parents threatened to sue school officials if they allowed AIDS carriers to attend school. Experts disagreed on the issue. The head of West Germany's health insurance service urged quarantine, warning that the spread of the disease could create an unbearable financial burden. Federal Health Minister Dr Blewett agreed with the purport of this judgement. Announcing an increase in the AIDS budget, he urged "homosexuals and heterosexuals to modify sexual behaviour and sexual practices that might transmit the disease". He estimated that the number of Australian AIDS cases would rise from the present 100 to 600 by the end of 1986; and the average cost of treating AIDS patients was \$50,000 per year — clearly a cost not affordable in epidemic proportions.

For me the most interesting response was from the homosexuals. They betrayed no sign of shame or repentance for the wreckage they wrought. There were no appeals for counselling services to help them return to the straight life. Instead they persisted in the aggressive impertinence that has become their trademark. In Rio homosexuals issued a manifesto denouncing the publication of findings about AIDS as "scientific terrorism manipulated by reactionary forces". In what must rank as the most futile rebellion in history, they "liberated" a Rio suburb to form a base of operations against "the oppression of AIDS" — as if they were not the infected oppressors. In Sydney a bitchy spokesman attacked New South Wales legisla-

tion on AIDS as a "cheap and thoughtless gesture", thankless of the respectability conferred upon them by the Wran government.

The chief voice of Australian homosexuals during the August apocalypse was that of Mr Adam Carr, publisher of the aptly titled magazine *Outrage*, and member of the Victorian AIDS Council. Carr shifted the burden of the AIDS epidemic from homosexuals to the straights, whose "hypocrisy" thwarts programmes to make sodomy "safe sex". Carr's notion of a remedy was to expand the number of homosexuals through sex education courses meant to recruit young men to the joys of sodomy with condoms. In a spectacular aggressive display, he attempted to intimidate straights by menacing them with the phantasm that a homosexual strike force has society in its maw: "Homosexuals are quite literally everywhere," he ranted, "and politicians, the media, and everybody else are just going to have to learn to acknowledge that." Thus the macho cant of decadents on a ship that they cannot see is sinking. It was repeated in Brazil and in New York, when the National Gay Task Force responded to the announcement by the US Department of Defense that it would screen all recruits for AIDS. The decision was denounced as "overreaction" that "might legitimise the use of the test by anyone who, out of fear of AIDS or in ignorance, might wish to discriminate against people who have been exposed, even though it poses no risk to co-workers".

The homosexuals' response revealed extreme egotism and colossal impertinence. They not only refuse to accept any responsibility for the horrendous consequences of their depravity, they would shift the blame to the average bloke. They not only entertain no thought of relinquishing their high-risk self-indulgence, they demand the protection and perpetuation of it from the very community that they have so grievously injured. Homosexuals sow the seeds of their own destruction in more than one sense. After apocalypse, Armageddon.