

Students' awareness of and attitudes to AIDS

J.S. BROWN, MRCGP
W.G. IRWIN, MD, FRCGP
K. STEELE, MD, MRCGP
R.W. HARLAND, FRCGP

SUMMARY. *Students' attitudes to and knowledge and awareness of the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) was assessed by questionnaire. The recent information campaign reached a high proportion of the sample of 1063 students and television was the most memorable medium. Students were generally aware that AIDS was not associated with social contact but there was confusion about the risk of infection from donating or receiving blood, with 17.9% of blood donors now less willing to donate blood. Most of the students were aware that the condom reduces the risk of spread of AIDS sexually but there was no indication of widespread condom usage among the 399 students who admitted they were sexually active; 39.1% of this group used condoms alone or with other protection. Almost half the sample (47.6%) would like to have the opportunity to have their blood tested for the AIDS virus; 96 students would prefer this to be at a clinic and 59 of them would not wish their family doctor to know the result. A high proportion of the sample considered that AIDS victims should be cared for at home or in a special hospice.*

Introduction

DURING March and April 1986 the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) launched a publicity campaign about the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) in major daily and Sunday newspapers. This was followed by a more extensive campaign beginning in December 1986, involving television, radio, newspapers and information leaflets. In addition to the DHSS sponsored advertising, the BBC and IBA have recently mounted a week long intensive television information campaign on AIDS. The efficacy of such advertising campaigns has been questioned.¹

To date Northern Ireland has been the least severely affected region within the United Kingdom in terms of deaths from AIDS and the number of people known to be positive to human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).² Students are a recognized risk group for sexually transmitted diseases.³ As intercontinental travel is also a feature of student life the student campus may be a portal of entry into Northern Ireland for those infected with HIV.

The aim of this survey was to assess the attitudes to and knowledge and awareness of AIDS among a student population.

Method

Students who attended the student health centres at the Queen's University of Belfast and the University of Ulster at Coleraine

J.S. Brown, General Practitioner and Medical Officer, University of Ulster at Coleraine; W.G. Irwin, Professor of General Practice, K. Steele, Senior Lecturer in General Practice, R.W. Harland, Senior Medical Officer, The Queen's University of Belfast.

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during a two week period beginning 9 March 1987 were asked by research assistants to complete a questionnaire about AIDS.

The questionnaire consisted of four main sections. The students were asked about their source of information and knowledge about the AIDS virus, whether their awareness of AIDS had affected, or would affect, their behaviour (in this section they were also asked whether and by whom they would wish to be tested for the AIDS virus) and what their attitudes to AIDS sufferers were.

Results

Of 1108 students invited to complete the questionnaire, 1063 completed it fully (95.9%). The age of the students ranged from 17 to 49 years with 90.7% being between the ages of 18 and 24 years; 56.3% were female and 43.7% were male.

Sources of information on AIDS

When asked how long they had known that AIDS could affect them 36.6% said for more than one year before the survey but 8.7% only became aware within the two months before the survey.

Government information leaflets had been read by 86.9% of students and 81.6% had seen or heard government information films or broadcasts. Television documentaries and news were the most important source of information about AIDS (Table 1).

Table 1. Source of information considered to be most informative.

	Percentage of students (n = 1063)
Television documentaries and news	64.5
Magazines and newspapers	18.6
Government information leaflets, films and broadcasts	5.7
Talking to friends	3.9
Doctor/nurse/counsellor	2.5
Radio documentaries and news	1.4
Other	3.3

n = total number of respondents.

Knowledge about the virus

Almost all the students (95.9%) realized that there is no cure for AIDS and 97.3% knew that a person could have the virus asymptotically. Fifteen per cent thought that the incubation period from acquiring the virus to developing signs of the syndrome was less than 12 months, 38.6% that it was more than one and less than five years, 24.6% that it was more than five years and 21.8% did not know.

In response to questions about the transmission of the virus, the proportions of students who stated that AIDS could *not* be contracted by the following methods were: shaking hands, 97.1%; using a public toilet seat, 94.2%; using a church communion cup, 90.5%; kissing, 87.6%; and mouth to mouth resuscitation, 79.1%.

Table 2 shows which people were thought by the students to be at high risk of becoming infected with the AIDS virus. In addition, 24.6% of students believed that donating blood was a method of becoming infected with the virus.

The students were asked whether particular forms of contraception afforded protection against transmission of the virus:

Table 2. Persons considered to be at a high risk of becoming infected with the AIDS virus.

	Percentage of students (n = 1063)		
	Yes	No	Don't know
Homosexual males	98.0	1.3	0.7
Heterosexuals with multiple sexual partners	97.6	1.5	0.9
Intravenous drug abusers	96.4	1.7	1.9
Bisexual males	93.0	4.0	3.0
Babies born to mothers who have AIDS	92.6	1.8	5.6
Haemophiliacs requiring injections to stop bleeding	63.0	24.6	12.4
People requiring blood transfusion in this country	36.0	51.9	12.1
Dentists treating an AIDS patient	17.6	68.5	13.9
Doctors/nurses treating an AIDS patient	15.4	72.1	12.5
Cannabis smokers	4.4	85.8	9.8

n = total number of respondents.

97.5% thought the condom afforded protection, 8.2% the cap, 7.5% spermicidal cream, 5.8% coitus interruptus and 3.2% thought sterilization was effective in this way.

Effect of the epidemic on behaviour

Of the 319 students who were blood donors, 17.9% said that publicity about AIDS had made them less willing to donate blood.

When asked about their sexual behaviour, 399 students admitted that they were sexually active. Among this group the most popular form of contraception was the oral contraceptive pill (46.9%); 23.1% of the group relied on the condom alone and 16.0% used the condom along with another method of contraception. Concern about AIDS had affected their choice of contraceptive for over one-third of this group (38.6%).

Nearly half the students (506) said they would like the opportunity to have a blood test for AIDS: 37.7% of this group would prefer this to be done by their family doctor, whereas 19.0% would prefer the anonymity of a special hospital clinic and 43.3% had no preference. Of the 96 students who would prefer to be screened for AIDS at a hospital clinic, 59 (61.5%) would not wish their family doctor to know the result of the test.

Attitudes to AIDS sufferers

When questioned about the problem of caring for AIDS sufferers, 51.6% of students thought that they should preferably be cared for in a special AIDS hospice and 37.4% considered that home care was best for as long as medically possible. Only 3.6% thought that AIDS sufferers should be cared for in a general hospital and 1.0% that they should be confined to a lock-up ward; 6.3% did not know.

Discussion

Our results show high awareness among students of the severity of the AIDS problem, but the results indicate some confusion as to the incubation period and mode of transmission of HIV.

Almost two thirds of the sample indicated that they became

aware within the previous 12 months that AIDS could affect them. This coincided with the period of increasing publicity about AIDS, culminating in the intensive BBC, IBA and government information campaigns. Certainly, the most memorable medium for presenting information about AIDS appears to have been television. The radio played a less important role and, although the government information campaign reached a high proportion of the sample, only a small percentage credited the government campaign with being the most important source of information about AIDS. These findings may not be true for other groups in society and so the continuation of a varied information campaign is important.⁴

The students were aware that AIDS is not associated with social contact. Most appear to have accepted that HIV cannot easily be passed by saliva during kissing or mouth to mouth resuscitation.⁵ A high percentage of the students considered homosexual males to be at a high risk of contracting AIDS. A similar percentage of the sample believed heterosexuals with multiple sexual partners to be at a high risk. AIDS is therefore perceived to be a disease associated with promiscuity. Drug takers sharing needles were also seen to be at risk.

There was a high awareness of the protection afforded by the condom, but our results do not indicate that this has led to a widespread use of the condom among those students who said that they were sexually active.

The responses to the questions about donating or receiving blood highlighted some confusion. More than one third of students considered that there is a risk of contracting AIDS from a blood transfusion in the UK, despite specific information on these points being given by the DHSS in its leaflet *AIDS — don't die of ignorance*. This could indicate that the information was not assimilated or that it was not believed. Another matter for concern is the proportion of student blood donors who are less willing to give blood following the publicity about AIDS. Clarification of this aspect should be a priority in future information campaigns.

It is interesting to note that almost half of the sample would like to have the opportunity to have their blood tested for HIV. Approximately one fifth of these would opt for testing in a special hospital clinic rather than by their general practitioner and of these more than half would not wish the result of the test to be forwarded to their family doctor.

The final section of our survey indicated that the majority of the students held a compassionate view of AIDS victims, believing that they should be cared for at home or in a special hospice.

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Address for correspondence

Dr J.S. Brown, University of Ulster, Cromore Road, Coleraine, Co. Londonderry BT52 1SA, Northern Ireland.