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## *Editor's Letter*

The last few decades of this century are experiencing the havoc created by a new disease known to all and sundry as AIDS - the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

Caused by a retrovirus (the Human Immunodeficiency Virus-HIV formerly known as Lymphadenopathy-Associated Virus-LAV or Human T-Lymphotropic Virus type III-HTLV III), this disease is effecting an alarmingly increasing number of people world-wide. Its fatal outcome within a few years of infection has instilled great fears in the entire populations particularly as it is being recognised that susceptible people include those outside the risk-groups-homosexual/bisexual males, IV drug abusers and recipients of blood and its products e.g. haemophiliacs.

AIDS is basically a sexually transmitted disease although it has been transmitted through the use of infected syringes and needles, infected blood/blood products and sex-toys. Vaginal intercourse is just as risky as anal intercourse. There is no evidence to suggest, however, its transmission through saliva (e.g. kissing or sharing of drinking cups), toilet seats, social and classroom contacts. Infants born to HIV positive mothers acquire the virus during intra-uterine life, parturition or subsequent breast-feeding.

The disease appears to have originated in Central Africa with eventual spread to America and Europe. Until January 1987 there have been nearly 30,000 cases\* reported in the USA and over 630 cases\* in the UK. In Malta 5 lives\* have been claimed until December 1986 and at least 27 are known to be HIV positive (\*weekly Epidemiological Record No. 7, 13 February, 1987).

Albeit the fact that the disease is still incurable much can be done by medical personnel in the hope of dampening the ever increasing number of infected persons. Educating people about the nature of the disease and the adoption of preventive measures should contribute significantly towards this aim. Although fear itself may help in keeping this 20th century plague in check, it is a doctor's duty to manage individual cases not only medically but also by offering, tactfully, continuous psychological and moral support both to the patient and his immediate relations. "When frightened by the problem of AIDS we should not simply cross to the other side of the street. We have a responsibility and a duty towards the victims and we must not treat them as outcasts. The country must face this challenge as a united nation, preserving our humanity." (Mr. Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, U.K.).

*Mark Bugeja*

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