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Waxman Warns Against AIDS overreaction October 12, 1985

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By Chris Chrystal

WASHINGTON—Delay in recognizing the seriousness of AIDS in the early days of the epidemic will cost thousands of lives, but now there's a danger of "hysterical overreaction," says Rep. Henry Waxman.

Waxman, Democratic chairman of the House energy subcommittee on health and the environment that deals with acquired immune deficiency syndrome legislation and funding, said the Reagan administration and the public underreacted to AIDS for a long time "because people thought it was affecting only the gay community."

But, now, he said, "I worry about hysterical overreaction that would force us to take action that won't curb the spread of the disease, but may add even greater misery to those people who are going to suffer."

He said in an interview now that everyone has heard of AIDS, irrational fear could inflict needless pain, punishment and discrimination on victims.

"I would hate to see an AIDS patient or one tested positive for antibodies lose their jobs and insurance coverage, be considered a pariah by the community and be isolated and cast aside ... for fear they may be transmitting the disease, when in fact that's not possible," he said.

Nervous employers may want to subject employees to screening tests for antibodies, but 90 percent of those exposed to the virus will never get AIDS, though they "may well be screened out of a job and screened out of insurance," Waxman said.

Public health authorities have repeatedly emphasized that AIDS is spread only by blood or intimate sexual contact, and that the screening test, which detects exposure to the AIDS virus, was designed only to test donated blood.

By the end of the Reagan administration in 1988, AIDS will have cost the nation \$8 billion in medical care alone, Waxman said. More than 13,000 cases already have been reported in the United States. Half of those with AIDS have died and the prognosis is poor for the others.

Waxman, whose district includes Hollywood, said if AIDS in the United States had gotten its start in another group besides homosexual men, there would have been more pressure to finance research.

Rep. William Dannemeyer, a conservative Orange County, Calif., Republican, has proposed legislation banning youngsters with AIDS from attending school and backed a bill making it a felony for a member of a group at risk for AIDS to donate blood.

These would include homosexual or bisexual men and female prostitutes.

Waxman, a liberal, warned against "medical McCarthyism," and said AIDS should not be used for political gains.

Congress has approved nearly \$200 million for AIDS research in fiscal 1986, and the Reagan administration has awakened to its responsibilities, but it is coming too late for many victims, Waxman said.

"Their unwillingness to put in money for research has cost us precious time in the battle to find a cure and a way to prevent this dreaded disease. Thousands of lives will be lost as a result," Waxman said.

He noted, however, that Margaret Heckler, forced to quit as Health and Human Services secretary, had pushed twice this year for increased AIDS funding.

Forcing preventive measures is tough because of privacy laws, but public health officials "should be permitted to take whatever measures are appropriate," such as closing bath houses, if they contribute to the spread of AIDS, Waxman said.