

Oral sex may be important risk factor for HIV infection

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

A study of homosexual men living in San Francisco who were recently infected with HIV-1 suggests that in about 7% of cases the virus was likely to have been transmitted during oral sex.

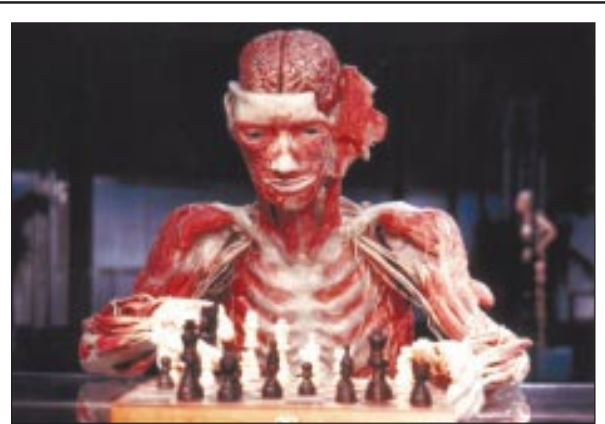
Dr Frederick Hecht of the University of California, San Francisco, and colleagues there and at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta evaluated 122 people recently diagnosed with HIV-1 infection who were presumed to have acquired their infection between June 1996 and June 1999. They tried to determine how the men contracted the disease.

The researchers used a new HIV testing method that makes it possible to determine if an individual has been recently infected. The subjects were interviewed in unusual depth and, whenever possible, excluded from the "oral sex" category.

Of all the cases, researchers determined that 20 were potentially acquired through oral sex. On further evaluation, and elimination of cases in which HIV-1 transmission may have occurred through another means, the researchers classified eight cases (7%) as probably due to oral transmission.

All eight cases were men who reported that they thought oral sex carried no risk or only minimal risk of transmission. "I think this is the best data available to date," said Dr Robert Janssen, director of the division of HIV/AIDS prevention at the CDC. He added: "I think it reinforces what we've said already—which is that condoms should be used for whatever type of sex you have."

Earlier research suggested that HIV transmission was possible during oral sex, but the new



The exhibition *Body World (Koerperwelten)*, which will open on 11 February in Cologne, consists of anatomical specimens made from plastic. It attracted controversy when it was previously shown in Mannheim and Basle, with critics claiming that it dehumanised people.

study is being received as the strongest evidence that it may actually occur at a significant rate.

The new findings, which are based on retrospective data and subject to recall bias, may not resolve the question entirely. None the less, the researchers concluded that, even though oral

sex was associated with a lower risk of transmission than were other sexual behaviours, it might be an important mode of transmission because of its frequency.

The results were presented at the recent 7th conference on retroviruses and opportunistic infections in San Francisco. □

Canada faces healthcare crisis

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

The proposal by Canada's federal health minister, Allan Rock, to save the country's healthcare system by paying half the cost of a national home care programme has been greeted contemptuously by provincial premiers. They say that he should restore billions of dollars of funding he has cut in past years before introducing such "boutique" programmes.

In a letter to the prime minister, Jean Chrétien, Ontario's premier, Mike Harris, said that Mr Rock's attempt to position himself as the saviour of Medicare (Canada's health insurance system) was "blatant hypocrisy." "After all, the federal government is responsible for the largest funding cut in Canadian history," they added.

Meeting later in Quebec city, the premiers agreed that the system needed fundamental reform but that without more money it would collapse. They want restoration of the Canada

Health and Social Transfer Payments to 1994-5 levels, when Ottawa assumed 17% of total healthcare costs. This would add \$C6.3bn (£2.7bn; \$4.38bn) to the present spending level, they said. Prime Minister Chrétien said that the transfers have already been restored to the 1993-4 level.

The prime minister and the premiers agree that the healthcare system is in crisis, a fact which the public and health workers are acutely aware of as a result of emergency room overcrowding, shortages of nurses and doctors, and complaints by doctors of overwork. According to the latest poll, eight in 10 Canadians believe the system is in crisis, and only one in four rates it highly.

Alberta's premier, Ralph Klein, increased the controversy about solutions by proposing to use private hospitals for major surgery (*BMJ* 1999;319:1520), thus taking the load off the public system. This was criticised by federal officials, who feared the plan would lead to a two tier system. □

Full story in News Extra at www.bmj.com

Medical research site in Berlin threatened

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

The huge financial loss of a Berlin health insurance company is threatening the existence of one of Germany's most renowned medical research sites, the Max Delbrück Centre for Molecular Medicine, in Berlin-Buch.

The Berlin Senate has decided to cut down on superfluous hospital beds in order to save the main local health insurance company AOK (Allgemeine Ortskrankenkasse). Several local hospitals will have to be closed.

The university hospital Charité must also make a contribution of about DM60m (£19m; \$30m) to the overall savings. It intends therefore to halve the number of beds in two Charité hospitals—the Robert Rössle Hospital and the Franz Volhard Hospital—both situated in Berlin-Buch on the outskirts of east Berlin.

These hospitals are important research partners of the Max Delbrück Centre for Molec-

ular Medicine, which was founded in 1991 from the former institutes of the East German Academy of Science. Since then about DM1bn has been invested in the research centre.

The Robert Rössle Hospital specialises in cancer treatment and the Franz Volhard Hospital in cardiovascular diseases. Both are carrying out important clinical research in cooperation with the molecular biology laboratories of the research centre (molecular medicine is a field traditionally neglected in Germany).

In addition to the cut in beds and the consequent loss of staff, the university status of both hospitals is in danger. This would threaten the funding of ongoing research projects and the establishment of biotechnology firms in the research centre.

After protests from the scientific community and the federal government, the Berlin Senate is now seeking a compromise. □