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State's Gonorrhea Rate Highest In the Nation

"The United States is in the midst of a major gonorrhea epidemic, and Alaska's rate of gonorrhea is the highest in the country," warns Frederick McGinnis, Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services.

"It is likely that at least one out of every hundred Alaskans contracted gonorrhea in 1971," the Commissioner pointed out.

"There were 2,744 reported cases last year, and we know that only a fraction of cases are ever reported to public health authorities."

(Nationwide, it is estimated that only one-sixth of the cases of gonorrhea treated by private doctors are reported to public health authorities.)

Gonorrhea, a venereal disease which, if untreated, can cause sterility in both men and women has increased 900% in Alaska since 1965 — mostly among men and women in their early twenties.

Commissioner McGinnis is particularly concerned about this alarming increase because the disease can be cured so easily, usually with penicillin.

The Commissioner cited a number of reasons why it has been so difficult to control the spread of gonorrhea.

1. Gonorrhea is spread by sexual contact and its spread is extremely rapid.

2. Symptoms of gonorrhea usually are readily apparent in the male: painful urination and a discharge of pus will occur a few days after exposure. But 80% of infected women carrying the disease have no symptoms at all.

3. Many private physicians don't report the cases they treat — so that the sexual partners of these persons cannot be contacted for treatment, and they continue to spread the disease.

4. Until now there haven't been funds for adequate investigation and treatment of sexual partners.

5. Some strains of gonococci have become resistant to penicillin and other antibiotics.

6. There is no immunity to gonorrhea.

7. There is still a social stigma associated with VD: people are ashamed to come for examination if they think they have been exposed.

8. Communities haven't been willing to face the fact that this is a widespread problem which affects all economic and social classes.

Commissioner McGinnis is confident that the picture can change in Alaska. Many states have been able to decrease their gonorrhea rates dramatically through massive education, screening and follow-up programs.

The Department of Health and Social Services is currently seeking funds to launch such a campaign and is already sponsoring a cooperative effort among all health agencies to plan a public education program.

Commissioner McGinnis emphasizes that it is still up to the individual to have a test made if he suspects he may have gonorrhea, to seek treatment, and to take responsibility to see that his sexual partner is examined.

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