CU lacks a definite policy on AIDS education, cases

By TONI JOSEPH
Columbia University is a leading educational and research institution in the city with the nation's highest number of AIDS cases. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome has already claimed the lives of at least four members of the Columbia community, according to a member of the Columbia Gay and Lesbian Alliance.

But the University administration has no set policy on how to educate the community about this fatal epidemic, or how to respond to students, faculty and staff who are stricken with the disease.

University officials agreed last month to establish a committee of administrators and students who would "define a University policy" on AIDS—a disease that Senior Vice President Joseph Mullinix, chair of the new committee, says "has caused a fair amount of concern" on campus.

The committee had its first meeting only last Friday. It has not yet decided on an agenda. Its membership is still incomplete. And critics of the committee say the existing members are unqualified to set the kind of comprehensive policy that is needed.

Information about the goals and the workings of the AIDS committee is difficult to obtain. Meetings of the committee, like those of most University committees, are closed to the press and public. Only authorized spokespersons are to speak with the press, "to avoid 15 [different] opinions" being publicized, said Mullinix in an interview this week.

A growing number of concerned students and faculty are frustrated by the slow progress of the University and anxious for the committee to set an example for the city and for universities nationwide by setting a strong, well-defined policy on AIDS. Columbia's recent decision to divest itself of its South
African-related stock holdings has given the University a high profile in the Ivy League and the world of higher education, and to many, made it a natural leader.

Members of the Columbia Gay and Lesbian Alliance, one of the largest campus organization of gays and lesbians, and other Columbia community members worried about the AIDS epidemic, are concerned about the make-up of the AIDS committee and the scope of the policy it is discussing.

Critics of the committee say it should include at least one medical expert on the disease. Mullinix has refused to disclose or confirm names of committee members, but one person on the committee privately confirmed this week that none of his colleagues has medical or scientific expertise on AIDS.

Mullinix said AIDS experts will be brought in as consultants to the committee. In addition, his office is to distribute reading materials on AIDS to committee members so they can educate themselves on the complex issues raised by the epidemic.

"We're going to do a lot of reading," said Anastasios Kalomiris, a student member of the committee.

Even an expert committee might not write a policy that is specific enough, according to campus activists concerned about AIDS. Michael Dowling, a health advocate with the Gay and Lesbian Alliance, said all existing University health and education programs need to be carefully reassessed and made to apply specifically to those with AIDS. Daniel Fass, another CGLA member, said the University policy should publicly guarantee the full rights of students, faculty and staff who contract AIDS.

Rosalind Fink, director of the campus Of-
Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, said the University’s general non-discrimination policy already forbids discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. But the policy does not specifically include people with AIDS, who can be heterosexual or homosexual.

Fink said the University would treat students, faculty or staff with AIDS “individually” and said those with AIDS would be protected from discrimination under the clause protecting the handicapped.

Activist groups on campus hope the University’s policy extends beyond protection of those who have AIDS, to protection of the students, faculty and staff who comprise the Columbia community.

One faculty member said the committee should work to coordinate the disparate AIDS educational programs on campus, and should sponsor campus-wide forums on AIDS to help end the damaging misconceptions about the nature and transmission of AIDS that lead to prejudice against innocent people who are ill.

Because a growing number of New Yorkers with AIDS—an estimated 40 percent—are non-white, the committee should also sponsor discussions between groups like the Gay and Lesbian Alliance and Black Student Organization, according to Abby Tallmer, a New York City gay and lesbian rights activist.

Some Columbia community members concerned about AIDS also want the University to increase the Health Service staff so that students who have AIDS, or are afraid they have been exposed to it, can talk to trained health professionals.

Just as important, many feel the committee’s agenda should include a recommendation that the University make a strong commitment to AIDS research.