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[ARTICLE]

Panelists refute charge that AIDS is from Haiti

By CHRISTINE BRANDT

Racism and prejudice surrounding AIDS was the topic at a forum last night in the Barnard Hall James Room.

The Haitian Students Association sponsored the forum called "AIDS: The Social Impact" to address misconceptions about the disease and to inform the community about AIDS, according to Ahooly Coradia, one of the forum's coordinators.

Jacques Decatalogne, a Haitian doctor and AIDS researcher, said the Centers for Disease Control's statement, since retracted, that Haitians constitute a high risk group for AIDS has resulted in prejudice against Haitians.

"A disservice has been done against a small country," he said. "People have lost their jobs and apartments, children have been ostracized, people have refused to accept laundry from Haitians."

He rejected the idea that the AIDS virus was originally spread by native Haitians, one of several theories that have been advanced

by scientists to explain the origination of the disease. "The disease started in Haiti because homosexuals were vacationing there and passed on the disease," he said.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome destroys the body's immune system, making it vulnerable to fatal diseases such as cancer and pneumonia. The usually fatal AIDS is transmitted primarily through sexual contact, shared needles and blood transfusions.

A member of the Executive Committee of the New York Association of Black Journalists, A. Peter Bailey called the media's coverage of the epidemic racist. He said they have focused too much on Africa and Haiti as sources of the AIDS epidemic and were racist in their description of the disease's origination. He cited a statement by a doctor in a recent Newsweek article: "African health, with the crumbling of colonial health structures, the massive relocation of people and the ecological disturbance, was seriously deteriorating and the world would suffer the consequences." He also quoted excerpt from The New York Times and the Daily News.

Baily told the audience to approach the subject of AIDS rationally rather than emotionally. "Don't be evading things and trying to put things off on other people," he said.

Baily pointed out that only within the last year has AIDS received significant coverage in the black press. "Escapism and the black community's identification of AIDS as a white person's problem" were the reasons for this, he said.

Laura Pinsky, a mental health counselor at University Health Services and one of the coordinators of the University's Gay Health Advocacy Project, cautioned against a tendency to blame the sufferers of AIDS. Pinsky said racism and homophobia have stigmatized AIDS patients.

Peter Seitzman, a physician who cares for AIDS patients, discussed the symptoms and the diagnosis of AIDS.