

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

CU hospitals keep AIDS testing voluntary

By Gail Javitt

New York hospitals, including Columbia affiliates, have no current plans to screen patients for AIDS, according to hospital officials, although a Texas hospital has begun to test all patients for the Human Immuno Deficiency (HIV) virus.

According to representative of Houston's Methodist Hospital, Cindy Lea, the decision to ask patients to take the test on a voluntary basis was an internal hospital decision, not mandated by an outside body such as the state or the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

While New York hospital administrators call mandatory testing an invasion of privacy, Lea said the hospital requested the test out of concern for the health care workers. She said 87 health care workers around the country may have contracted the disease from patients.

But according to a spokesperson for the CDC, only 12 health care workers have been documented as contracting the HIV virus on the job, and none of that number has developed AIDS or an AIDS related illness yet.

Lea said she does not think Methodist Hospital treats many

AIDS patients. However, the hospital performs many many blood transfusions, increasing the potential risk of contracting AIDS.

“[We] don’t know what the problems in the program will be, [it] will at least make health care workers more conscious of the problem,” Lea said.

According to Lea, the hospital will continue to follow CDC guidelines, which suggest that health care workers wear gloves, gowns, masks and goggles when handling blood and bodily fluid.

The CDC allows hospitals to determine the necessity of an AIDS test, in conjunction with state and local departments.

But administrators at some local New York hospitals said they disagree with the Methodist decision, saying the privacy of patients could be violated.

“One of the real problems with AIDS testing is that the attitude to confidentiality and non-discrimination has not been addressed,” Dr. Jay Dobkin, chief of the Infectious Diseases Division at Columbia-affiliated Harlem Hospital said.

“I think until the very clear protection is created against discrimination and for confidentiality, [there] will be a lot of problems with doing the widespread testing,” he added.

Dobkin said he thinks the confidentiality problem is unfortunate because some high-risk groups who would benefit from the test would not seek it, such as women who might have unknowingly contracted the disease.

According to Dr. Gerald Thomson, executive vice president for professional affairs at Columbia Presbyterian, that hospital will not institute a widespread testing program like Methodist's.

“We disagree with Methodist Hospital's decision,” Thomson said.

Thomson said patients who are suspected of having AIDS are asked to take the test, as well as those patients who request it themselves. He said this complies with New York State

guidelines.

State guidelines also state that health care workers should take the same precautions when dealing with all patients, whether or not they are suspected of having AIDS.

The tests will generate a false sense of security among patients who test negative because of a "time window" between the time of exposure to AIDS and testing positive for the disease, Thomson said.

AIDS testing is being discussed at Harlem Hospital, according to the associate dean of the hospital, Dr. Cheryl Healton. Healton stressed that counseling should be available along with the voluntary testing, and even without testing.

"Counseling should be there no matter what," Healton said.

Alan Rosenfield, dean of Columbia's School of Public Health, said while he is opposed to mandatory testing, "as long as they're [Methodist Hospital] offering it in a totally voluntary manner I have no problems with it."

According to Dobkin, the Methodist program will not fulfill its goals.

"[The program] is not going to make patient management risk free for hospital employees," Dobkin said.

"Testing patients admitted to the hospital is not really a logical strategy if what you want to do is interrupt transmission outside the hospital," he said.



SPECTATOR/KIRSTEN MAGNANI

KINGSBOYS: The Kingsmen, whose concert tonight in Wollman will be the musical event of the century, have taken to rehearsing in the Spectator photography office. Isn't that special? Betcha.