Columbia Daily Spectator, 29 October 1990 — CGHAP offers health care to students infected with HIV [ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

Back

CGHAP offers health care to students infected with HIV

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Columbia students infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) can receive special health care from University Health Services--something that few other universities provide.

"We really are the only campus that provides full treatment for HIV," said Laura Pinsky, director of the Columbia Gay Health Advocacy Project, (CGHAP).

CGHAP offers free, anonymous antibody testing for students through University Health Services. The tests are designed to detect the presence of antibodies that are manufactured by the body when it is infected with HIV, Pinsky said.

"These tests are often mistakenly referred to as AIDS tests," Pinsky said, adding that testing positive for HIV does not mean a person has AIDS or that the person will get it in the future.

Students who test positive for HIV can receive treatment at the HIV clinic, a division of University Health Services and a joint project of CGHAP.

There are approximately 30 students currently being treated for HIV at the clinic, acc-

ording to the head physician at the clinic, Dr. Richard Glendon.

"Our guess, however, is that this number constitutes only half the amount of students on the campus with HIV,"Glendon said.

The majority of the students being treated at the clinic are asymptomatic of the disease, Glendon said.

The clinic offers monitoring of the immune system and the medication AZT, the only federally approved drug used for the treatment of HIV, in order to prevent the development of Pneumocystic carinni pneumonia,(PCP) and other diseases which lead to AIDS, according to Paul Douglas, CGHAP's co-director.

Monitoring of the immune system, involves "T4 cell tests" which count the number of white blood cells, lymphocytes, in blood samples.

T4 and T8 lymphocytes are the cells which are killed by the HIV virus. When the T4 cell count is less than 500 per cubic centimeter, it is recommended that AZT treatment begin, according to the Essential AIDS Fact Book, which was written by Pinsky and Douglas.

The book, which is currently being revised, is given to every Columbia student, and provides updated factual information on the cause, prevention and treatment of AIDS.

Students who have developed opportunistic infections as a result of a weakened immune system are referred to Dr. Craig Metroka at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital. Metroka is

an editor of the AIDS Treatment Information Newsletter which provides current medical literature on AIDS.

"Metroka has also done a significant amount of research on AIDS," Douglas said. "He truly provides state-of-the-art care."

Counseling and support

Columbia also offers peer counseling at health services to help define high risk activities and answer questions for students who are planning to undergo antibody testing.

Health services also provides peer counseling for gay and lesbian students who have questions about sexuality that they need to talk with someone about, Douglas said.

"It gives them an opportunity to speak with a responsible gay person who can talk to them about what coming out means," Douglas said.

In addition to the peer counseling service, Pinsky and Gerard Ilaria, a social worker from New York Hospital, lead weekly support group meetings for Columbia students and affiliates who are infected with HIV, Douglas said.

"The support group is designed to alleviate the mental anguish that goes along with being infected with the virus," Pinsky said.

CGHAP has conducted floor talks on campus to provide additional information on AIDS for first-year students. Representatives of CGHAP go to each of the 32 floors where first-year students live on campus and conduct an hour-long presentation on the prevention of AIDS.

"The purpose of the talks is to emphasize the fact that HIV cannot be spread through casual contact and that all people need to do is use condoms to protect themselves during intercourse," Douglas said.

Insurance

Although antibody testing and immune system monitoring are both covered by the health services fee, AZT is not. But through the AIDS Drug Assistance Program, a federally and state funded program, students who are infected with HIV can receive the medication at no cost, according to Douglas.

Columbia has recently revised its health insurance policy to provide more long-term coverage for students with HIV, Douglas said.

Director of Columbia Health Services Dr. Richard Carlson said that the insurance policy was revised not just for students infected with HIV but for all those suffering from chronic illnesses.

"Because prolonged illnesses can be very costly for students who remain enrolled in school, we needed to define a limit at which liability would end," Carlson said.

Previously, students diagnosed with HIV or any other illness could only receive coverage for a period up to 52 weeks. After this period, the Student Health Insurance, (SHI) paid up to $2000 per year for medical expenses resulting from the illness. This forced students to require alternate means of paying for treat-

ment if their expenses exceeded this amount, Carlson said. Under the new Catastrophic Coverage package, students receiving treatment for long term illnesses reach a limit of liability, expenses above $25,000, at which point SHI will pay the next $1 million of medical expenses at 100 percent coverage.

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Laura Pinsky and Paul Douglas, director and co-director of the Columbia Gay Health Advocacy Project

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