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Commissioner talks on public health

By Anne Kornblut

Infant mortality, poverty, substance abuse, and AIDS are the city's most severe health problems, New York City Commissioner of Health Woodrow Myers told a group of about 35 people at a Public Affairs Forum on the Health Sciences campus yesterday.

Myers, who was appointed by New York City Mayor David Dinkins in March, presented a slide show to the group, beginning with a graph that showed a recent increase in children living in poverty in New York City. According to the graph, between 30 and 40 percent of the city's children currently live beneath the poverty level.

Infant mortality has also increased in New York City since 1978, although the national rate has dropped, Myers said. He attributed the local increase to a rise in babies with substance abuses, saying that there has been an "explosion in the number of reports [of drug use]

during pregnancy.

There have been increased drug-related emergency room visits in New York in recent years, Myers said, calling cocaine the “drug of choice,” and crack a “particularly pernicious drug in this city.”

Admission to drug programs has become increasingly difficult because there are few available slots for addicts, Myers said, adding that heroin is the most easily treated abuse.

“We don’t have anything specific we can offer for cocaine...we can only remove that person somehow from that environment so they can avoid the stimuli,” Myers said.

There are currently 8,000 HIV positive cases in New York City, in addition to an increased number of congenital syphilis and tuberculosis cases; especially among the homeless and intravenous drug users, Myers said. These diseases have “found a new niche within these populations,” Myers said.

Myers opened the discussion to the attendants at the forum, several of whom compared the results of prevention versus treatment of drug use.

One of the major barriers faced in dealing with current health problems is “how we think about health care,” he said.

“We tend to think of it as a privilege, instead of as a right...health ought to be treated differently because it belongs to all of us,” he said.

Associate Dean of the School of Public Health Cheryl Heaton said that there is a “dearth of user-friendly centers for women...there is only one in this city that allows women to come in with their children.”

One attendant said that “somebody ought to be speaking for the fetus” when the child is born with a drug problem.

Myers responded to the comments by asking, “When does the government’s responsibility start for human life, even leaving the whole abortion issue aside? What should the policy of the city of New York be?”

Myers called on community-based organizations to help deal with these problems because the Department of Health is unequipped to do so on a daily basis.

“The infrastructure already exists in the neighborhoods,” he said, “such as at Columbia University.”

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