

AIDS is volatile prison health issue

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WETUMPKA, Ala. (AP) — Carmen Harris, isolated with other female Alabama prisoners carrying the AIDS virus, feared she would bleed to death in her cell.

Stitches from routine uterine surgery had torn open, but nurses on three shifts failed to answer her pleas for help in November 1987, she said.

"They was afraid of the blood. They was afraid of catching the virus. They had a fear of the word AIDS," said Ms. Harris, who waited 12 hours before she was taken to a hospital near Montgomery.

"You're treated like an alien, like you had the plague," she said. "I got sentenced for manslaughter. The judge could have just as well sentenced me to death row. It's like being punished for my crime and my diagnosis."

Behind prison walls, AIDS is a crackling health issue.

Some states isolate inmates who have the virus even if they haven't developed symptoms. Those in segregation consider it cruel confinement to a new death row. Prison officials defend it as a way to contain the virus.

While arguments can be made for segregation, nothing excuses the failure to provide medical care, inmates' advocates say. Yet prisons aren't equipped to treat the long-term illnesses wrought by AIDS.

"Those on the new death row are not getting appropriate medical attention. They are being condemned to waste away," said Benjamin Schatz, director of the AIDS Civil Rights Project of the National Gay Rights Advocates. "They are treated as if infection indicates they have done something wrong."

"AIDS has made the job of providing prison health care more difficult, more hazardous and more expensive," said Curtis Prout, director of the internship program at Harvard Medical School.

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome is most commonly transmitted during homosexual acts and the sharing of contaminated

and 14 states test or will soon start testing all incoming inmates.

Federal prisons randomly test 10 percent of incoming inmates and all those leaving the system. Those with AIDS or the virus are not isolated.

Mandatory mass screening and segregation of all HIV-positive inmates is opposed by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care, which sets voluntary standards for health care in prisons. It favors education and changing behaviors that cause AIDS.

Alabama inmates who tested positive to the AIDS virus have charged in a class action lawsuit that they receive poor medical care and cruel treatment. The federal trial began in March.

Suits are pending in two other states that segregate. Inmates with AIDS in Connecticut say their medical care is grossly inadequate. California prisoners assert that the level of their medical and psychiatric care is "atrocious."

"There is no logic, no rational basis and no medical basis to the (segregation) policy," said Robert Cohen, former medical director at New York City's Rikers Island Prison and an expert medical witness. "It is only fear and discrimination which gives rise to such barbarous actions."

Men are segregated at Alabama's Limestone Correctional Facility inside Dorm 7, where even the exercise yard is cut off from the main yard by a 14-foot-high fence.

The sense of doom is so heavy that inmates call it Thunder Dorm, recalling the futuristic city in "Mad

Max Beyond Thunderdome," a movie about society's collapse after a nuclear holocaust.

Inmates eat with wooden ice cream sticks instead of forks and spoons. Meals come on color-coded trays. Their dirty laundry goes out in red bags to be washed separately.

They worship apart from other inmates and don't have equal access to programs that would allow them to have jobs or earn early parole.

One inmate with the virus was forced to mop the halls behind him as he walked. Others were given surgical masks and made to clean telephones with bleach or ammonia swabs after making calls.

Michael Marsh, 41, a thief, said life in Thunder Dorm features fights, knifings and high-risk sex among prisoners who figure they're going to die anyway.

"Guys would rather be killed here than die from AIDS. They hunger for death another way. Any other way. Something that would be honorable," Marsh said. "It's like living in the valley of the shadow of death. If AIDS don't kill you, one of the guys might."

Some inmates want to keep the HIV prisoners isolated, saying those infected would be killed "as soon as they got into the yard."

"It's either we take them out or they take us out," said Stewart Hughey, 28, a rapist, who testified in favor of segregation in the Alabama case. "If one of them gets his semen or blood on an open cut, they just signed your death warrant."

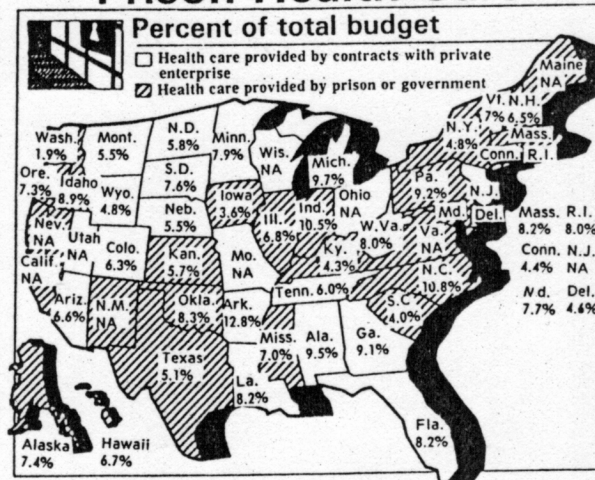
In New York state, where AIDS is the leading cause of death among inmates, medical care is deficient, according to an 18-month study released last year by the Correctional Association of New York.

Doctors were unfamiliar with AIDS treatment and detection, the study said. Since 1981, more than 500 prisoners have died of AIDS; in 25 percent of the cases, the disease was not diagnosed until an autopsy.

"AIDS and prison is proving to be a devastating combination," said Cathy Potler, author of the report. "Imprisonment becomes a virtual death sentence."

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Prison Health Care



Medicine behind bars begins with the fundamental paradox of caring for misfits banished by a society that could care less about their well-being. Add more specific problems and the provision of health care in prisons becomes a constant struggle. (AP LaserGraphic)