

A Mysterious Ailment

By Jerry Bishop, Staff Reporter of the *Wall Street Journal*

A mysterious, often fatal illness is breaking out in epidemic proportions among young homosexual men and drug users.

More than 180 cases of the strange illness have been reported since last summer to the federal Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. As of last Friday, at least 74 of the victims have died. All the victims are men and 90% of them are either homosexual or bisexual. Many of the victims are drug users.

The illness is characterized by months of fever, malaise, and drastic weight loss. In almost all cases the patients develop overwhelming infections of one or more of a dozen different viruses, bacteria or protozoa. The infecting microbes are types that do not ordinarily cause overt human disease. Many of the patients also develop a rare type of cancer.

To the astonishment of medical scientists, most of the patients appear to have recently developed a defect in their immune systems that prevents them from fighting off infections. The infections are extremely difficult to control with antibiotics and antiviral drugs.

"We are reasonably confident that this is, in fact, a new medical problem," said Dr. Harold Jaffe, an epidemiologist on a new task force organized by the Center for Disease Control to search for the cause of the illness.

In an effort comparable to that launched last year to unravel the mystery of toxic shock syndrome, the center's task force is trying to find out whether a new germ has emerged or whether something in the environment has changed to account for the sudden outbreak of the illness.

For example, the task force is checking into the use of sexual stimulants by the victims on the possibility these chemicals can impair the immune system and leave the user vulnerable to infections.

Among such stimulants are chemicals that are inhaled. These include amyl nitrate sold in glass vials, known by the street name "poppers" and isobutyl nitrate sold as "liquid incense."

First hints that some unusual illness was breaking out came earlier this year when researchers in New York and Los Angeles reported cases of both a rare kind of pneumonia and a rare cancer called Kaposi's sarcoma occurring in a few young men. The men were either homosexual or drug users or both. The disease center alerted doctors and health officials around the country last summer to the strange ailment.

This week's *New England Journal of Medicine*, published today, devotes three articles to describing 19 of the patients, six of whom died. Publishing three lengthy articles on the same illness is unusual for the medical journal.

“The patients are typically young homosexual men, most of whom live in large cities and many of whom use drugs,” said Dr. David T. Durack of the Duke University Medical Center in Durham in an accompanying editorial in the medical journal. The patients, he added, also suffer infections of the type heretofore seen only in patients in the late stages of cancer whose immune systems have been deliberately suppressed to prevent rejection of the transplanted organ such as a kidney.

Tests showed that almost all the patients had a depressed immune system and that this occurred relatively recently, a rare phenomenon in previously healthy persons.