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Attitudes to and knowledge about the acquired immune deficiency syndrome: lack of a correlation

The acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is a controversial disease about which there is much public ignorance and confusion. A recent government advertising campaign attempted to inform the general public about the disease's aetiology, epidemiology, and prognosis. Such advertising presumes that the provision of factual information will modify attitudes towards the disease. As homosexuals are a stigmatised group within society, however, it is possible that attitudes to the treatment of AIDS are not related to specific knowledge about the disease but are instead a consequence of general attitudes to homosexuality. In this study we examined attitudes among preclinical medical students, whom we may regard as a surrogate for "the educated layman" in that they have a good knowledge of biological principles and are likely to have a high awareness of and interest in issues about AIDS but have not received any specific clinical training about or exposure to the disease and its treatment. If factual information could be effective in modifying attitudes it should be evident in this group.

Method and results

Anonymous questionnaires were distributed at lectures to medical students in their first and second preclinical years at University College London in February 1986. Attitudes were assessed on five point scales (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Questions concerned attitudes to homosexuality (18 items modified from previous studies^{1,2}), attitudes to AIDS (eight questions; see table), knowledge of AIDS (13 questions, with a total of 36 subitems), religious and political views, and whether the student was homosexual.

Relation of eight attitudes to AIDS and its treatment with measures of knowledge about AIDS, attitudes to homosexuality, and measures of religious and political views, and inter-relation of the measures

| | No (%) of subjects scoring†: | | | | | Correlations | | | |
|--|------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Scale for knowledge of AIDS | Scale for attitudes to homosexuality | Religion | Politics |
| <i>Relation of attitudes to AIDS with other measures</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| There is likely to be a cure for AIDS in the next five years | 24 (17) | 28 (20) | 58 (41) | 25 (18) | 7 (5) | -0.141 | 0.087 | 0.012 | -0.009 |
| AIDS is likely to become a relatively common heterosexual disease | 10 (7) | 27 (19) | 43 (30) | 43 (30) | 19 (13) | -0.043 | 0.038 | -0.003 | 0.038 |
| The only way to control AIDS is to make all homosexual activity illegal | 87 (62) | 30 (21) | 10 (7) | 9 (6) | 4 (3) | -0.110 | -0.493*** | 0.060 | -0.305*** |
| AIDS patients present such a threat to society that they should be compulsorily detained in hospital as soon as they are diagnosed | 36 (25) | 49 (34) | 19 (13) | 23 (16) | 16 (11) | -0.033 | -0.444*** | 0.056 | -0.142 |
| Patients who have contracted AIDS through homosexual activity do not deserve medical care | 116 (81) | 15 (11) | 3 (2) | 3 (2) | 6 (4) | -0.012 | -0.398*** | -0.028 | -0.057 |
| Fear of infection with AIDS will reduce the quality of care given to homosexual patients | 10 (7) | 19 (13) | 20 (14) | 67 (47) | 27 (19) | -0.031 | -0.211* | 0.141 | 0.002 |
| Describing AIDS as the "gay plague" is an overemotional response to a serious illness | 6 (4) | 23 (16) | 23 (16) | 37 (26) | 54 (38) | -0.009 | 0.511*** | -0.159 | 0.209* |
| More medical research funds should be given to developing a vaccine against AIDS | 3 (2) | 6 (4) | 19 (13) | 41 (29) | 74 (52) | -0.067 | 0.169 | -0.197* | -0.105 |
| <i>Inter-relation of other measures</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| Scale for knowledge of AIDS | | | | | | | 0.172 | -0.256*** | 0.132 |
| Scale for attitudes to homosexuality | | | | | | 0.172 | | -0.287*** | 0.451*** |
| Religion | | | | | | -0.256*** | -0.287*** | | -0.188* |
| Politics | | | | | | 0.132 | 0.451*** | -0.188* | |

†1=Strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree. Numbers of subjects do not always total 143 as a few subjects omitted some items.
*p<0.05, ***p<0.001.

Comment

Attitudes to AIDS and its treatment among a group of preclinical students did not correlate with knowledge about the condition but instead were related to attitudes in general concerning homosexuality. The absence of a relation of attitudes to specific knowledge is a not uncommon finding in social psychology.⁴ The implication for health education is clear: if we wish to reduce the "prejudice about AIDS [that] still abound[s]"⁵ and to increase public awareness of the problems of patients with AIDS there should be increased emphasis on general education about homosexuality rather than on the specific, factual details of the disease.

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