

# Big Jump In VD Rate

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Venereal disease is an out-of-control epidemic running like wildfire through the bodies of young people. Yet it is also like an iceberg: Only its top shows while the chilly bulk lies hidden in deadly ignorance.

That's the picture of VD drawn not only by local health officials, but health officials across the nation.

Figures for Santa Cruz County are shocking enough: In the first five months of 1970, 232 cases of gonorrhea were reported. There were 12 cases of syphilis. Before that, County Health Officer Richard Svihus says his department does not even have records. "But it was a lot less."

In a county of 125,000 people, 250 persons in five months is

not a large number. Even though the rate doubled over the year before, statistically there are only 2 cases of VD per 1000 people, or .2 of one per cent.

But that's only part of the story. Dr. Svihus says the majority of VD cases occur in young people, aged 15 to 25, with a tapering off to about age 29. Up to 90 per cent of cases are in those age groups.

Why? "Because young people are always more sexually promiscuous than older people, on a relative basis," he says.

The much-talked about sexual revolution and new sex freedom probably has added its effect as well.

Most significant is the "hippie" life style of living without care, sharing sex and shunning doctors and establishment

health services, according to Svihus.

"From what I've seen, a hippie has VD until proven otherwise," the health officer says.

He hastens to add he is not talking about "normal" young people who have adopted hippie styles of long hair and dress, and who "are actually clean, healthy people," but the true hippie who lives and believes his philosophy. A large number of persons who come to see Donna Smith, the Health Department's venereal disease clerk, are of this type, according to Dr. Svihus.

So, percentage-wise, the infection rate is heavier than it might seem. Sentinel Editor Gordon Sinclair estimates there are about 18,450 youths in the

15-25 age bracket in this county, and another 6000 in the 25 to 29 group.

That means the actual VD rate is much higher, perhaps 1 per cent of its prime target group: the young.

"It's just the top of the iceberg," Dr. Svihus says. "A lot of cases don't get reported."

Legally, all VD cases have to be reported. But the requirement is widely winked at. Even though names of patients are held confidential there is fear that the names somehow will leak out of the files.

A 1962 study estimated that 80 per cent of cases nationwide are not reported. Dr. Svihus has made an effort to get local physicians to report their cases, and says a small part of the increase in VD cases may come from increased reporting.

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