

AID Health Dept

Demand for AIDS testing inundates county

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By TOM LONG

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SANTA CRUZ — A flood of people wanting to be tested for the AIDS antibody has forced the county Health Department to change its testing system, despite a radical drop locally in the number of positive test results.

"Because of the media talking about testing we were booked all the way through July for tests," said AIDS Antibody Testing Coordinator Sally Blumenthal-McGannon Wednesday.

"We used to average around 40 people a month, but in January we had 62 and in February we had 84,"

Blumenthal-McGannon said. "Then a couple of weeks ago we got 30 calls in one day for testing.

"I called all over the state to other counties and everybody was being bombarded," she said.

As a result, the testing department has been built up and the procedures streamlined so that the county clinic can now test about 40 people a week.

"The testing is still anonymous, still confidential, still free and still high-quality," Blumenthal-McGannon said.

In the past week the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta has suggested that people who received

blood transfusions between 1978 and 1985, before blood was screened for AIDS contamination, consider seeking antibody testing and U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop has suggested that women considering pregnancy take the test as well.

The AIDS antibody test cannot predict whether a person will get AIDS or not, but instead is used to confirm exposure to the virus. Recent estimates have been that as many as 50 percent of those carrying the antibody will eventually get the disease, and that the chances of a mother passing the disease on to an unborn child are as high as 60 percent.

"There's been a lot of concern and a lot of fear," said Blumenthal-McGannon. "And people are motivated by fear."

In fact, out of the 84 people tested in Santa Cruz County in February, only two tested positive for the AIDS antibody, a dramatic drop from the county's previous 11-percent positive test figure for last year.

"The majority of people coming in now are scared but haven't necessarily been exposed," Blumenthal-McGannon said.

After realizing the backlog of testing appointments had gotten out of

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AIDS

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hand, the county restructured its testing procedure. A new phone number — 425-2671 — has been set up to handle AIDS testing calls, and the phone will be manned from 8 a.m. to noon Monday through Friday next week to accept appointments.

Blumenthal-McGannon stressed that even those who've made previous appointments to be tested should call next week to reschedule, since they'll be tested sooner through the new system. Results from the test take two weeks.

So far, 28 people have been diagnosed as having AIDS in Santa Cruz County. Of those, 21 have died.

"A lot of people come in now and just say it's their responsibility to know," Blumenthal-McGannon said.