

Santa Cruz AIDS group outspends other disease agencies three to one

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SANTA CRUZ — In Santa Cruz County, more than 40 times as many people die from cancer and heart disease than AIDS, yet the Santa Cruz AIDS Project spends about three times as much as the non-profit agencies for these other leading killers.

Dr. Ira Lubell, medical director for the county Health Services Agency, says funding imbalances are not as simple as they look. Dollars spent per year of productive life also should be considered, he said, noting that people who have heart disease generally die much later in their lives than people with AIDS.

"I wouldn't say AIDS has sucked the money away from other diseases, but I would say that as we see

resources become scarcer, everyone is going to begin fighting," he said. "I don't want to see people beginning to point their fingers, saying, 'You got too much,' when the answer is that no one is getting enough."

In addition, he points out, "one is increasing, and the others are not."

Lubell said the information about how to avoid heart disease has been available for years, yet "people continue to smoke, people continue to be obese, people continue to lead sedentary lives."

With AIDS, he said, health officials are pushing new prevention methods in hopes of educating the public before the disease becomes as commonplace as heart disease.

Please see AIDS — A12

A-12 — Monday, May 17, 1992 — Santa Cruz Sentinel

AIDS activism

Continued from Page A1

At the local branch of the American Heart Association, Dr. Jean Poulos is working to make people aware of treatment and prevention of cardiovascular problems.

She says that in Santa Cruz, AIDS activists have been very vocal, but they are actually a small minority of the population.

"I imagine AIDS is going to be with us for a long time," she said. "I think the attention is going to go down on AIDS as survival increases."

Poulos, who is on the board of directors of the heart association, said AIDS receives more attention because it is more dramatic and exciting than heart disease.

"These people are facing death in a short period of time," she said, while heart disease patients are generally older, and often live with the problems for a longer period of time.

Poulos would like to see more money going to heart disease education and research, and she said she would also like to see patients get "equal time" in the media.

"People with heart disease usually aren't activists," she said.

American Heart Association Field Director Pete Pabon is quick to respond to questions about funding inequities.

"AIDS is very concerning, but heart disease is the number one killer," he said. "Yes, AIDS and cancer are very scary issues, nowadays, but people have to realize that heart disease kills one out of every two people in America."

Pabon says the media is largely responsible for bringing so much attention to AIDS.

"AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, and what happens is that when you're dealing with sexuality, it arouses people's curiosity," he said. "Look at how they glorified Magic Johnson. When a basketball player keels over from a stroke, do you think they make such a big deal about it?"

Santa Cruz AIDS Project Executive Director John Laird does not

object to all the attention, which he hopes will help slow the spread of the disease.

"We'd all be in trouble if AIDS became the number one killer," he said.

Laird said the money issues are "very awkward, because there's no way you can put a priority to disease," and he justifies current high spending levels for AIDS by explaining that there has already been for several decades done on heart disease and cancer.

"We're starting from scratch," he said. "In the past 11 years, researchers have had to answer how you get it, how you transmit it, how you stop it."

Laird pointed out that unlike cancer and heart disease, AIDS is always fatal.

Dr. Judith Luce, a medical oncologist at San Francisco General Hospital and the president of the American Cancer Society unit there, said while Laird's assertions are true, heart disease and cancer "kill a lot more people annually than the total amount of people killed during the entire length of the AIDS epidemic."

She says AIDS activists have exposed inequities in the health care system, and the government has responded by buying them off with unprecedented amounts of monetary support.

"It's cheaper to fix it for one disease, and not do anything for the others," she said.

Jil Heath, the executive director of the American Cancer Society's Santa Cruz County unit, agrees there is a movement to push for more funds for education and research in her field.

"That's not to say we want a bigger slice of the pie," she said. "Actually we would just like to see a bigger pie."

She says she is happy to see the money going into AIDS, but she would also like to see more funding and attention focusing on breast cancer.

"That's without any complaining or whining about anything else that's being funded," she said.

Heath says historically there has not been any competition between cancer and AIDS, because there are many mutual benefits from research in both fields.

Cancer research is actually well funded in Santa Cruz County, Heath said, because UC Santa Cruz has scientists doing cutting-edge work, which has received about \$500,000 in grants in the past five years.

Heath says community agencies working with AIDS, cancer and heart disease issues are supportive of each other.

"Santa Cruz is a ... unique community, in that our health agencies tend to link arms and find solutions," she said. "We are all here to make life better."