

CHILDREN WITH AIDS

Their courage is enormous; our limited ability to care for them tragic

BY ELIZABETH HANLY

PHYL LIS POLAND

In what looks for a moment like a typical nursery-school project, children are making paper flowers. But at Bronx Municipal Hospital's day-care center for twenty-one children with AIDS, the only facility of its kind anywhere, the flowers are for the funeral of a classmate. Death isn't foreign, and no one shies away from discussing it. "I used to watch the kids getting their gamma globulin treatments at the hospital, wisecracking with another buddy from day care one bed over," social worker Naomi Buchanan says. "Their courage is enormous."

The number of cases of pediatric AIDS, most of them in the cities of the Northeast and in Miami, continues to rise. To date, more than eight hundred children in the U.S. have full-blown AIDS; the Public Health Service predicts a conservative 350 percent increase in cases by 1991. As of 1987, in a breakdown done by the Centers for Disease Control, 78 percent of children with AIDS contracted the disease *in utero* from an infected parent; most of these kids will die before their fifth birthday. The same breakdown estimated that another 12 percent got the virus from blood transfusions done before strict screening started in the spring of 1985; 5 percent got it from blood products used to treat hemophilia; and 5 percent picked it up in some yet-to-be-determined way (including sexual abuse). Curiously, children infected through blood work seem to live longer than those born with the virus. One hypothesis is that the processing of blood products somehow cripples the virus, making its effects uncertain.

"If one of the children is missing from the classroom for a time, the others are anxious," says Buchanan, who also runs a support group for the children's parents. "Even the very little ones seem to intuit how high the stakes are. When we can, when a child is hospitalized, we'll make a phone call as a group or bring in photos we've taken of him there, so the others can have that continuity, that reassurance."

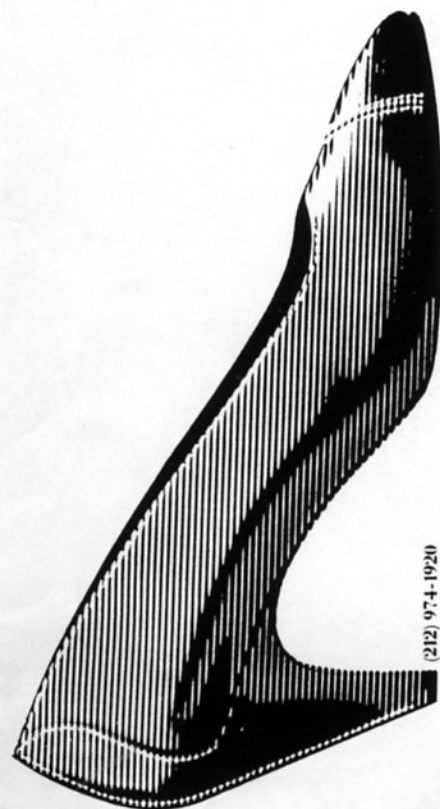
About a half-dozen research projects around the world are exploring the transmission of AIDS *in utero*. Though far from

complete, they suggest that 30 to 50 percent of infected pregnant women will pass on the virus. It can take twelve to fifteen months to know if a child will actually develop the disease: although they test positive at birth, some children throw off their mother's antibodies, presumably because they don't have the virus.

And the women at highest risk—many of them living with IV-drug users or using drugs themselves—are often those least likely to seek an abortion. The communities most affected by IV-drug use are, not surprisingly, poor. (AIDS hits poor black and Hispanic children the hardest: 51 percent of children with AIDS are black and 27 percent are Hispanic.) "A child means hope, a rare commodity in these communities," says Frank Cancellieri, M.D., a psychiatrist at the Health Science Center in Brooklyn. "Sometimes a woman can totally change her life for the sake of her child, sometimes not. But many try." However they try, it may be too late. AIDS can incubate for so many years that a woman may discover she has the virus only after she's passed it along to her child.

The state often prevents children born to IV-drug users from returning home with their mothers. Hospitals are loath to test children bound for foster care for viral antibodies because a positive test result can make them even harder to place. Buchanan tells of one child "who spent a year and a half living in a hospital, ten months of which were in isolation during the height of the AIDS terror." Phyllis Gurdin, a social worker who heads the Specialized Foster Home Program, at Leake and Watts Children's Home, in Yonkers, NY, has been able to place thirty children with AIDS over the last two years and considers her success substantial. Clara Hale and her daughter, Lorraine Hale, Ph.D., whose work with drug-addicted infants at NYC's Hale House is so respected, are planning to open a new group home for children with AIDS—Hale's Cradle. But, as one area nurse confided, "If you count just the kids from our hospital, already there'll be a waiting list."

Elizabeth Hanly writes for "Elle" and "New York Woman."



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