

British push panic button over disease

by Mark Burdman

Characteristically, the period of late July-early August is regarded as the "silly season" in Britain: Parliament is out, leading influentials head for vacation, the financial centers speculate on plans for the coming autumn. This year, the "silly season" has been interrupted, not only by the war between 10 Downing Street and the Buckingham Palace-Commonwealth combination, but also by alarming reports about epidemics spreading across the United Kingdom.

Those who are pushing the panic button over the spread of disease are doubly alarmed, because the parlous state of the British economy is forcing cutbacks in funding for research laboratories that investigate the cause and spread of diseases.

On July 30, the London *Guardian* reported that a group of health professionals, led by Lord Young of Dartington and a team working under his supervision at London's College of Health, had drawn up a plan for a national health education program to combat AIDS. The crux of the plan would be for increasing funds to combat AIDS by 25 times the current measly 2.5 million pounds sterling. This plan, the paper noted, "is backed by leading Conservative back-benchers and senior officials at the Department of Health and Social Security."

The *Guardian* quoted Lord Young: "The Government has not yet woken up to the full gravity of the epidemic. The lives of tens of thousands of people could be at stake. It has been a story so far of too little, too late." Also quoted was former Health Minister Sir Gerard Vaughan: "We are approaching a natural disaster. We need all the help we can lay our hands on." Estimates reported by the *Guardian* are that 200,000 people in the U.K. will be carrying the AIDS virus by 1988.

Days later, the Sunday, Aug. 3 British press sounded more alarm bells. The *Sunday Telegraph's* Carole Dawson, in a piece called, "The Hidden Epidemic," reported on a "mysterious meningitis outbreak," which is "spreading faster and more widely than people thought," and which is "rapidly reaching epidemic proportions." In the first six months of 1985, Dawson reports, there were 72 deaths and 938 cases reported throughout the country, a 50% increase over 1985. And, she adds, this number is believed to be a significant under-reportage of cases.

Attention has focused on the district of Cotswold, in

Stroud, Gloucestershire, where there has been a persistent, and unexplained, epidemic of meningitis for six years. What makes people wonder about Cotswold, is that it is a very wealthy area, and meningitis, which spreads more or less like the common cold, is, usually, associated with "environmental factors" of poverty, economic breakdown, and so on. The area is so wealthy, that, in a triangle around the district, one finds estates of Prince Charles and Princess Di; of Princess Michael of Kent; and of Princess Anne. Dawson makes a tongue-in-cheek joke about the possible links of the "Royal Triangle" to the meningitis spread.

Dawson reports that British government ministers are said to be "deeply concerned about the national picture [of meningitis outbreak] as well. Plymouth, Bristol, North Devon, Leeds, parts of Norfolk, a belt from Manchester to Merseyside and areas of London, are all affected."

Also on Aug. 3, the London *Sunday Times* headlined, "Deadly new virus starts epidemic fear," reporting on medical findings of a virus, called "Delta Agent," which "now threatens to spread in the same manner of AIDS." Evidently, this virus has a "piggyback" connection to hepatitis, attacking people who are already infected with hepatitis, and combining with the latter to produce "an extremely dangerous liver disease in up to 90% of cases."

A public health emergency

The *Times* of London headlined, on Aug. 4, "Infectious disease labs face threats of cuts as outbreaks increase," reporting, ironically, that "the number of public health laboratories which specialize in combatting infectious diseases is likely to be cut. . . . The plan [to cut the research labs] is being pushed forward when senior officials in the [Public Health Laboratory Service] are worried about their ability to cope with increasing outbreaks of meningitis, Legionnaire's disease, AIDS, and food poisoning."

One laboratory director, who withheld his name to the *Times*, commented on government cost-cutting proposals: "The morale of scientists and doctors working in the service has been devastated by [such proposals]. I have no doubt this is only the first phase in the plan to reduce drastically the number of public health laboratories." Another senior figure within the laboratory service is quoted: "The service has been cut to the bone in recent years and our resources have been stretched very thinly."

The public-health proposals of U.S. presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche are receiving increased attention in Britain. On the day of the royal wedding, British Broadcasting Corporation ran a feature on the U.S. LaRouche campaign, highlighting LaRouche's warnings on the AIDS danger. On Aug. 3, the *Sunday Telegraph* carried, next to the Dawson article, a feature on the "new puritanism" in the United States, in which context the *Telegraph* reported LaRouche's backing for the PANIC legislation in California (see page 58-63).