

Northern Flank by William Jones

AIDS debate breaks out in Norway

A leading doctor has proposed a classical public-health approach to the crisis: universal testing.

If the devil himself had developed a means to destroy mankind, the situation could not be worse." This is the way Magne Fagerhol, superintendent of the Blood Bank and Epidemiology Clinic at Ullevaals Hospital in Oslo, characterized the growing threat of an AIDS epidemic. On July 22, Fagerhol wrote a letter to the Department of Health, criticizing the nonchalant manner in which the department was treating the AIDS threat.

Fagerhol recommended that the entire population of Norway be AIDS-tested twice a year. Apart from the danger of infection outside the so-called high-risk groups, Fagerhol reasoned that mandatory testing would forestall any objection on the part of the more vociferous homosexual groups that such measures would be discriminatory. Fagerhol's letter was published on July 25 in the daily evening paper *Dagbladet*.

Some weeks earlier, the Oslo tabloids had sparked a minor uproar, when it became known that the superintendent of one of the local hospitals had had patients suspected of being drug-users or homosexuals AIDS-tested without their knowledge. If the test proved positive, the patients were informed of the results. The doctor was accused of using unethical methods and wanting to introduce fascist methods into the health services.

Publication of the Fagerhol letter further heated up the issue. Previously, the whole AIDS question had been treated somewhat peremptorily in the Norwegian press, giving the

impression that the medical authorities had things under control. The number of people infected was reported in the hundreds. Now it is estimated that there are approximately 2,000 carriers of AIDS—and that is probably a gross underestimate. The Health Service estimates that, at the present rate of spread, there will be 100,000-200,000 cases by 1990-1991.

Fagerhol, in an interview to the Stockholm-based Radio Free Sweden, stressed that the AIDS epidemic not only threatened the "high-risk groups," but all Norwegians. Mandatory testing of the entire population of Norway, a little over 4 million people, would cost 100-300 million Norwegian Crowns (\$14-30 million) according to Fagerhol; treatment of AIDS patients by the year 1991 would cost up to \$3.5 billion.

The cost of testing would be equivalent to a two-week national strike at the state-owned liquor stores or about one beer for every person in Norway. "This would be a reasonable price to pay," said Fagerhol, "especially if you consider that without such a measure, the treatment of AIDS patients in 10 years would cost us just as much as an entire year's health budget."

The Fagerhol letter was especially critical of the director of the Health Services, Torbjorn Mork, who has insisted on keeping AIDS testing on a voluntary basis, and has tried to squelch any talk of mandatory testing. Fagerhol recommended that Mork consider resigning his post and be re-

placed by someone prepared to deal with the AIDS threat more effectively.

Fagerhol pointed out that voluntary testing had not succeeded in getting more than 5% of the high-risk groups to take the test, thereby creating a serious threat to the rest of the population. "They are afraid that the results of the tests will be positive, and therefore will simply not allow themselves to be tested," said Fagerhol.

In his letter to the Health Services, Fagerhol also recommended that it be considered a felony, equivalent to attempted murder, if anyone who has AIDS does not inform his sexual partner that he or she is infected. A few days later, the Norwegian Department of Justice issued the results of a study which indicated that there is already on the books a law which would allow prosecution of anyone who with knowing intent infects another person with a contagious disease. It was indicated that this law could be applied to an AIDS carrier. Such a crime is punishable with up to eight years in prison if the person so infected dies, and up to five years otherwise.

The Fagerhol intervention has sparked off a political debate, and the AIDS question will come up for discussion when Norway's Parliament reconvenes in September. Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, a physician by profession, was interviewed on television concerning the Fagerhol letter and the position taken by her health director Mork. Brundtland said that she did not necessarily agree with the director of the Health Services, and that she considered AIDS a far more serious problem than was generally recognized. She set up a committee to investigate the issue and to make recommendations for an eventual change of government policy. Possible policy changes would then be voted on by Parliament.