



Seattle-King County / **DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH**  
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September 29, 1983  
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

### AIDS List Points Out Need For Further Education

The Seattle-King County Department of Public Health has identified the source of a list which has been incorrectly interpreted as containing the names of people with AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) said to have surfaced in some public service agencies. The list was developed at a local health care facility, and was intended for infection control purposes. Infection control precautions should be observed when health care workers care for persons with AIDS, and it is important that patients be individually and accurately identified for this purpose. Maintaining lists of persons thought to have AIDS is not an adequate way to approach infection control.

The list was compiled by an office which had received materials from individuals for whom a possible AIDS diagnosis was being considered or ruled out. In our opinion, such lists are not a useful or effective means of avoiding exposure to AIDS. Routine adherence to infection control measures is, in most instances, sufficient protection against the spread of communicable disease. The list subsequently surfaced at several other locations in the community, apparently inadvertently. The Public Health Department does not believe that any breach of medical confidentiality took place in creating the list, and is satisfied that appropriate remedial action has

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been taken by the health care facility. Medical confidentiality is of the highest priority, but a breach of security of medical records is not believed to have occurred in this matter.

After receiving a copy of the list on September 27, 1983, the Public Health Department investigated and learned that most of the individuals named do not have AIDS or AIDS-like illness. These inaccuracies are an additional important reason why such lists are inappropriate, in addition to a false sense of security engendered by such a list.

The Public Health Department has commended the Seattle Police Department for quickly moving to stop the circulation and use of the list in its hands. The lack of understanding about AIDS which created the list obviously also exists in the health care community where the list originated.

The existence of the list points out that the irrational fear of AIDS is a pervasive educational problem. While the issue of the list itself has been essentially resolved, the Public Health Department will intensify its educational efforts to help the lay and health care communities understand that AIDS is only transmitted by intimate contact. To this end, the Public Health Department is using the opportunity of a previously produced training video tape prepared with the Seattle Police Department to emphasize that public safety workers are at no appreciable risk of contracting AIDS through their usual business contacts. The Public Health Department has also produced an informative public service announcement for local television stations which points out that AIDS is not transmitted by casual contacts. Dr. Jesse W. Tapp, Director of Public Health, states that "the primary lesson to be learned from this unfortunate episode is that fear must be met with information; knowledge beats ignorance and eliminates needless anxiety."

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Available evidence indicates that AIDS is probably a communicable disease, but that the spread of the illness is associated with only intimate contact with an infected person. There is no evidence to support the fears that casual or even close contact with a person known to have AIDS will expose others to the transmissible agent thought to be the cause of AIDS. In other words, if AIDS is communicable, it is not very communicable. In addition, of the nine local cases of AIDS reported to the Public Health Department, only three are still alive. It is therefore very unlikely that police officers, or any other person, would come in contact with a person who has AIDS. Individual citizens of Seattle and King County should not be treated any differently because of ill-founded fears of a rare disease.

It was the possibility of inappropriate concerns about AIDS which led the Seattle City and King County Councils to fund the Public Health Department AIDS Project, which continues to respond to inquiries from individuals and groups; the AIDS Project telephone number is 587-4999.