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AIDS Survey Findings: Alaskans Need Accurate Information

While most Alaskans are knowledgeable about some of the basic biomedical facts concerning AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) and know that AIDS is transmitted through sex or AIDS-infected blood, many still harbor unwarranted fears about the spread of the disease through casual contact.

This is the conclusion of Alaska public health officials based on a recent survey of 450 Alaskan households conducted for the Epidemiology Office by the Institute of Social and Economic Research of the University of Alaska, Anchorage.

Of those responding to the survey:

- 95% know correctly that AIDS is a condition in which the body cannot fight off diseases
- 98% know also correctly that AIDS is sexually transmitted
- 98% know that the virus can be transmitted by sharing a needle with a drug user who has AIDS.

But Alaskans are much less knowledgeable about casual contacts and the spread of AIDS. For instance, 28% believe wrongly that AIDS can be spread by sharing drinking glasses with someone with AIDS, 15% believe wrongly that kissing can spread the disease, and 16% believe wrongly that mosquitoes spread AIDS.

Many Alaskans also believe that somehow donors of blood are at risk for getting AIDS. The misconception that blood donors are at risk for catching AIDS may result from the publicity that before 1985 some who received donated blood developed AIDS. Many are apparently unaware that only sterile, disposable needles are used to draw blood at blood banks. Many also seem unaware that the nation's blood supply has been cleaned of contaminated blood and that individuals with the AIDS virus are not allowed to donate blood.

It is obvious that Alaskans are concerned about AIDS. A substantial number--44%--are afraid of getting AIDS themselves. Also, 61% of respondents said they would not eat in a restaurant if they knew a food handler had AIDS. An additional indicator of the public's fears about AIDS is that 25% say they would not let their child attend school with a child who has AIDS.

The survey results underscore the need to provide accurate information about AIDS to all Alaskans. The current effort by Alaska's health professionals to deal with the growing problem of AIDS is focused on public education and on implementing the recommendations of the surgeon general's report to provide AIDS-related information to school children.

In addition, additional efforts are underway to expand the state's free voluntary blood screening program so that public health officials can counsel those who are infected with the virus. People who are shown to test positive to the virus must be counseled about methods to reduce behaviors that spread the virus. We must also make efforts to contact and counsel the sex partners of those infected because they are also at risk of developing AIDS. That the public supports such efforts, is demonstrated by the fact that 72% of the respondents indicated they would take such a test if it were offered free.