

Burning down their houses

How thin is the veneer of civilisation. Remember how quickly it came off in Luis Buñuel's film of the elegant partygoers trapped by an invisible angel in a closed room. This time round the *Exterminating Angel*, the pathogen, is the AIDS virus and the vectors are said to be the very people who each day may be risking their lives treating the victims of the disease. Recently a senator wanted to send HIV positive doctors to prison. Will he also, as in the days of the plague, burn down their houses?

All this hysteria began when five people became HIV positive after being treated by a dentist who either infected them with his own blood or transmitted the virus from one patient to another. In a highly publicised case one woman subsequently developed clinical AIDS and the national newspapers displayed pictures of her wasted frame, describing how she had become emaciated, lost her hair, was covered with blisters and acne, and developed vomiting, cramps, diarrhoea, and unremitting fevers. Outrage and panic ensued, giving rise to widespread demands for compulsory testing of health workers.

By June Vice President Quavle had joined in the fray by announcing that mandatory

testing was a good idea. The American Medical and Dental Associations at first opposed compulsory testing but later advised infected doctors not to do invasive procedures and to disclose their condition to their patients. Several states passed laws requiring hospitals to notify patients that they may have been exposed to AIDS through certain procedures. Finally, a senator introduced a bill in Congress imposing a \$20 000 fine and a 10 year prison sentence for doctors who knowing they are infected carry out invasive procedures without telling their patients.

Yet so far a minuscule number of patients are believed to have been infected by health care workers. Some 6000 health workers in the United States (including 300 surgeons and 1200 dentists), are said to carry the HIV virus, and according to a mathematical model their chances of infecting a patient are exceedingly small. They pale into insignificance, a recent editorial suggested, compared with the enormous risks of smoking and car accidents that society is willing to tolerate.

But why limit testing to doctors and dentists? ask some. Why not to manicurists, hairdressers, or barmen? Why not test every patient? "Disgustingly," writes a surgical

house officer "if I contract AIDS from a patient I am told to stop performing surgery. No thanks," he goes on, "either I operate on all patients, regardless of my HIV status or patients and surgeons should both have the option of selecting each other." He points out that some day his family responsibilities may take precedence over medicine.

Others have also alluded to the possible consequences of foolish legislation. What if those currently treating patients with AIDS were to question the wisdom of taking risks? Already inner city hospitals, where most of the AIDS victims are being treated, are experiencing shortages. Why be a hero, they might wonder, in a society that would show little sympathy if they themselves were to become infected in the course of carrying out their duties.—GEORGE DUNEA, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, U.S.A.

