

Outbreaks of Pneumonia Among Gay Males Studied

By HARRY NELSON, *Times Medical Writer*

Researchers are investigating mysterious outbreaks of pneumonia that have occurred among male homosexuals in Los Angeles and several other cities across the nation.

A report to be issued today by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta describes the first five cases, which were all homosexual men in their 20s or 30s stricken by pneumonia caused by a parasite that usually affects only cancer patients.

Another half dozen cases are under investigation in San Francisco, along with an undetermined number in New York, Toronto and Florida. The Times has learned.

According to Dr. Wayne Shandera, a CDC epidemiologist working in Los Angeles, researchers cannot explain why all cases so far have been male homosexuals. One patient died from the pneumonia.

"The best we can say is that somehow the pneumonia appears to be related to gay life style," Shandera said.

Nearly all of the pneumonia normally occurring in the United States is caused by bacteria or viruses, but the outbreak among the gay males has been due to neither bacteria nor virus but rather to a protozoan parasite named *Pneumocystis carinii*.

This organism is a common cause of death in cancer patients and transplant patients whose ability to fight infection has been compromised by anti-cancer drugs or drugs aimed at preventing rejection of a transplanted organ.

According to experts, perhaps half of all adults carry *P. carinii* in their

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lungs, but the organism causes no harm except in the cancer or transplant patients.

Investigators are now trying to learn whether there is a common factor in all the gay male cases that might explain why otherwise healthy individuals would become susceptible to a germ that normally causes no harm.

One lead may be that all five Los Angeles patients also had infections due to a virus that causes mononucleosis-type symptoms.

The virus, called cytomegalovirus, is a member of the same family that causes herpes infections. CMV, as it is called, has been shown to be capable of suppressing the body's immune defense system in a manner similar to anti-cancer drugs.

Also, a team of researchers from Mount Zion Hospital and Medical Center in San Francisco recently reported a study of 190 homosexual men which showed that 94% had evidence of infections by CMV. About half of heterosexual men tested had similar evidence of infection.

CMV virus can be transmitted by saliva, semen and several other

body fluids or substances.

Investigators are speculating that perhaps the CMV virus is suppressing the immune defense system of certain individuals sufficiently to make them vulnerable to the *P. carinii* already present in most persons' lungs.

Puzzling Aspect

However, the researchers are at a loss to explain why—so far at least—there have been no reported cases of this type of pneumonia among gay women or heterosexuals of either sex.

They are carrying out an intensive study to learn what the common factor may be in the life style of gay males. One speculation is that the inhalants commonly used in the gay community to heighten sexual feeling may somehow be involved.

Dr. Michael Gottlieb, assistant professor of medicine at UCLA Medical School, where three of the patients were treated, said the report is being issued by the Centers for Disease Control so that doctors can be on the lookout for cases of pneumonia among gays due to the protozoan parasite.