

Advisory Issued on Rare Disease Spread by Sex

By DAVID TULLER

Federal health officials are advising doctors to be on the alert for a rare sexually transmitted disease that is on the increase among gay men in the Netherlands and other countries.

The disease, lymphogranuloma venereum, or LGV, has been diagnosed in more than 90 gay men in the Netherlands and cases have also been reported in Belgium, France and Sweden. The infection is caused by a variant of the bacterium that causes chlamydia and can be treated with antibiotics. But unlike routine cases of chlamydia, LGV can cause severe gastrointestinal distress, including inflammation and bleeding of the rectum and colon.

Officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned that the disease could spread to the United States. But most doctors in this

country have never seen a case of the ailment and might incorrectly diagnose the symptoms as colitis, the officials said.

"You can get really sick with this, but it doesn't present like an S.T.D., and neither clinicians nor patients will be thinking of an S.T.D.," said Dr. Stuart Berman, chief of the epidemiology and surveillance branch in the division of sexually transmitted disease prevention at the disease control centers.

"If you treat it like colitis, you might be treating it with drugs that make the S.T.D. worse," Dr. Berman said.

LGV is primarily seen in developing regions, including Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. It is diagnosed mostly in heterosexuals and generally causes genital lesions and swelling in the lymph glands in the groin. Men who suffer from rectal symptoms have most likely acquired the infection

The ailment is part chlamydia and part colitis.

through unprotected anal intercourse, Dr. Berman said.

According to a report published recently in *The Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, a publication of the C.D.C., the outbreak was first identified in April of last year in Rotterdam. Thirty cases were diagnosed in 2003, and 62 more were identified through September 2004. Dr. Berman said the disease was not unknown in the United States but was extremely rare. He is concerned, however, because increased sexual risk-taking among gay men in this country has led to increases in syphilis, gonorrhea and other sexually transmitted

diseases in recent years.

"If you are traveling to other cities and meeting casual sex partners on the Internet, and they've been to other cities, then all you need is one person to introduce this into a sexual network," Dr. Berman said.

Dr. Jeffrey Klausner, director of the sexually transmitted diseases clinic at the San Francisco Department of Public Health, said that doctors at his clinic had not yet identified any cases of LGV, although they are aware of the Dutch outbreak.

"We're concerned enough to be making clinicians aware of it so they look for it," Dr. Klausner said.

He added that a definitive diagnosis of LGV can be made only through advanced laboratory tests.

Dr. Klausner and other health professionals are concerned because the rectal inflammation and ulceration caused by LGV could facilitate the transmission of H.I.V. and other blood-borne diseases.