Letter to the Editor

PREVENTING AIDS : NEED FOR A PROPERLY EVALUATED HE 'VACCINE'

Dear Editor,

In 1991, the first case of HIV infection from the Indian Armed Forces was documented [1]. By April 1993, more than 100 cases of HIV infection occurred among soldiers [2]. Available reports indicate that the trend is rising (more than 500 HIV positive in the Services to date). There is an urgent need to 'immunise' the soldier against AIDS, since he is at high risk because of the stress and strain, and circumstances of Service life. Men are known to react to strain in two ways; some find refuge in neurotic illness, while in others the weakening is of morals rather than of morale [3].

However, despite impressive technical and scientific advances, it is unlikely that either a vaccine or treatment will be available in the near future. 'Immunisation' of the soldier will therefore involve a well designed Health Education (HE) programme to promote sustained safe behaviour. Having decided to implement this, the question remains at what age the HE 'vaccine' should be given to ensure maximum protection.

Recruits enrolled for military training at the centres are in the age group 17-22 years which is a crucial time as they are on the threshold of the age group known epidemiologically to be at the highest risk for AIDS (20-49 years). It is appropriate that the first dose of 'vaccine' be given during the recruit's initial training.

We also need to know whether the present Health Education programmes (if any), at the various Regimental Centres are effective in improving their knowledge and attitudes towards AIDS, if not, we have to experiment with other innovative methods.

It is proposed that the effectiveness and efficiency of the various Health Education programmes in the Regi-

mental Centres should be evaluated with the active involvement of the Centre Commandants and Regimental Medical Officers based on WHO guidelines [4-7]. A properly evaluated and tested HE 'vaccine' should then be administered to all recruits on enrollment; with 'boosters' during their subsequent military careers, particularly before operations which are likely to precipitate stress. Record of these 'immunisations' can be entered in their service books along with TAB/TT vaccination status.

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