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COUNTERPOINT

## COUNTERPOINT; Get Moving on AIDS

By Robert E. Pollack; Robert E. Pollack, dean of Columbia College of Columbia University, is professor of biological sciences at the university.

The time has come for the Government to underwrite a nationwide effort to produce an effective vaccine against HTLV III, the virus that causes AIDS. Though a frightening new disease, AIDS is no longer so novel that such an effort would be premature.

Samples of the virus have been isolated and their entire sets of genes decoded. The human populations for testing and eventual inoculation with exist and are ready to volunteer. Yet the communities of physicians, and of public and corporate researchers, seem unable to organize the process.

Why is the nation unwilling or unable to expend the effort?

Two scientific reasons are given for the reluctance. One is that AIDS might be caused by a family of closely related variants of the same virus and that therefore no vaccine could be effective. The other is that there are no animals suitable for initial testing and thus no way to be sure a vaccine is safe for testing in people. It seems to me that these objections, though sound, are not conclusive.

There is at least one other reason for our inability to act: fear and hostility directed at a minority. The population at risk and ready to volunteer for testing is largely homosexual. Our leaders apparently do not wish to be involved with this minority. As a result, the clock runs out on thousands of victims without even the beginning of an effort that might prevent new cases. This is a social disaster.

All physicians have taken an oath to do no harm. But in fact they do harm by sitting quietly by, or referring AIDS victims to another physician or hoping the disease will go away after it destroys a few thousand homosexual men and narcotics addicts.

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