

□ INTERVIEW □

Since last September, Howard Singleton has been Senior Advisor to the Personnel Administration Bureau. In this capacity, he is responsible for a certain number of special projects, one of which concerns the problem of AIDS. Mr. Singleton willingly granted an interview to Liaison to tell us about this project.

Sylvie Gauvin: *Mr. Singleton, why is the AIDS project under the responsibility of the Personnel Administration Bureau?*

Howard Singleton: The Personnel Administration Bureau has a responsibility for the health of Departmental employees. AIDS was made a special project because it was a new problem requiring the development of new policies and new preventive measures. When those policies and measures have been put in place, then presumably the special project will be finished and the subject will be handled in a routine way.

S. G.: *Has the Department isn't obligatory testing an invasion of individual liberty?*

H. S.: The question of testing is complicated, and I think I should give a little background. What we are talking about is not testing whether somebody has the disease of AIDS, but whether somebody has been exposed to it and therefore has the antibodies in his blood. People who have the antibodies are called "sero-positive". They may or may not develop the disease. We would therefore not be testing to see whether an employee had the disease, but

whether he might eventually develop the disease or pass it on to others. If somebody actually has the disease, he will be sick and have symptoms which will be detected by a doctor, and that's a completely different question. We are not talking about people who have the disease of AIDS. We're talking about people who have apparently been exposed to it and are therefore sero-positive.

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If we are not testing for a disease and if sero-positive people may be healthy, why has the question of testing arisen?

Medical authorities seem to agree that testing the general population, or the entire staff of a business firm or government department, for example, serves no useful purpose. But there are certain categories of people for which testing may be desirable. Members of the foreign service, or at least those posted to unhealthy areas, might bene-

fit from testing. This is for two reasons. The first is that testing could enable such people to participate in 'walking blood banks' at posts abroad. These 'walking blood banks' would be composed of employees of our missions, and perhaps of other diplomatic missions, who would volunteer to give blood to each other in case of need. We are concerned about the needs of our own personnel. However, we could, though no mechanism has yet been established, co-operate with other countries in establishing a blood bank so that we would have more people and therefore access to more blood types. That would require some kind of AIDS testing among other things such as blood grouping.

Now there's a second reason for testing foreign service personnel, and it's more controversial.

Some experts believe that people who are sero-positive may have their latent HIV virus activated (which would cause a progression to fully-manifested AIDS) by exposure to other infectious diseases, such as malaria, hepatitis B, or certain venereal diseases. These experts would argue that people who are sero-positive should therefore not be sent to unhealthy countries. They also believe that, in sero-positive individuals, the progression to the full-blown disease may be triggered by the administration of live vaccines. They would therefore recommend that such persons not be sent to countries for which such vaccination was required.

As indicated, though, all the experts are not of the same opinion. The disease is relatively new and there has not been enough evidence accumulated to prove