

# AIDS expert strives to clarify misinformation

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ELMIRA — AIDS will claim as many lives during the next three years as it did over the entire decade from 1981-91, according to Linda Swarthout, RN, director of the HIV/AIDS Education/Coordination Project of Chemung County.

But misinformation about AIDS is still one of the biggest problems plaguing citizens trying to deal with the health crisis, Swarthout said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. Providing accurate and current information on the disease was the goal of an AIDS seminar she conducted Oct. 30 at Elmira's St. Joseph's Hospital, 555 East Market St.

In the 1980s, Swarthout noted, AIDS killed 100,000 people — a death toll that will double by 1994. Maintaining that AIDS eventually will touch everyone's life — by striking a friend, lover, spouse, family member or co-worker — she said she was struck by the lack of knowledge evidenced by the questions participants asked her during the seminar.

Contrary to a belief that most of the AIDS patients in Elmira are incarcerated in the city's two correctional facilities, Swarthout said just as many private citizens in Chemung County have or will have AIDS. Since 1981, 25 prison inmates have developed AIDS, she said.

Twenty-three Chemung County private citizens currently have "full-blown" AIDS, Swarthout said, emphasizing that more county residents are HIV-positive than that number indi-



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— Linda Swarthout

cates.

She explained that those statistics only apply to patients diagnosed within the county, and that the figures do not account for residents who were diagnosed in regions outside Chemung County.

She estimated that about half of Chemung's HIV-carriers contracted the virus through sexual transmission, while the other 50 percent were infected through intravenous drug use. She added that the HIV virus can be carried in blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk.

The topic of HIV-transmission prompted some interesting questions from seminar participants, she said.

Some people wondered whether mosquitoes that have drawn blood from people with HIV can then infect those they subsequently bite.

In response, Swarthout noted that one study done in a mosquito-infested area of southern Florida provided

evidence that this would not occur. Although the area was marked by a high incidence of AIDS among adults, children under the age of 10 showed no signs of having contracted the virus, she said.

Unlike the malaria parasite, which is transmitted to people when infected mosquitoes bite them, the AIDS virus "doesn't seem to live in the mosquito," Swarthout asserted. Also, mosquitoes draw blood out of their targets, rather than injecting them with blood from earlier victims, she said.

Contamination of patients by health-care workers has also been a concern recently, Swarthout said, citing the case of a Florida dentist who apparently infected five of his patients. The dentist died before researchers could determine whether he infected patients by using contaminated equipment or instruments, or through some other means, she explained.

The Florida case has prompted some

calls for mandatory HIV-testing for all health-care workers, Swarthout noted, dismissing such proposals as expensive, unrealistic and impractical.

"If we mandatorily tested health-care workers, then you can bet those health care workers will turn around and say, 'OK, now you've got to test (our) patients,'" she said.

Aside from the Florida dentist, no other health worker is known to have infected patients, Swarthout said.

Instead of mandatory testing for health-care workers, Swarthout supported the advice proffered in guidelines issued in October by the New York State Department of Health. In part, those guidelines called for the establishment of "infection control practices which decrease the opportunity of blood-to-blood exposure for both workers and patients."

Swarthout also cleared up confusion regarding the four stages of AIDS' progress.

AIDS' first stage begins with infection and lasts about six months, she said, noting that the virus is undetectable during this period.

From six months to 12 years after infection, the individual may test positive for HIV but show no symptoms of AIDS.

When they begin to show symptoms, people with AIDS have entered the third stage of the disease, which can last from one to five years, she said.

The fourth stage of AIDS, which ends in death, is the only stage that qualifies under the Center for Disease Control's criteria to be reported as a case of AIDS, she said.

## Parish board in Ithaca votes to close middle school

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ITHACA — In a 5-4 vote with two members absent, the school board of Immaculate Conception School determined Tuesday, Oct. 29, to close middle-school grades six, seven and eight in June, 1992.

Board members, school parents and parish officials claimed the middle school's declining enrollment and poor financial situation prompted the vote.

Observers also blamed a lack of interest in the school among Catholic parents, although at least one school board member felt parents had been "closed out of the process" that resulted in the closing.

Immaculate Conception, 320 W. Buffalo St., is the only Catholic school in Tompkins County. Its student body includes parishioners from the parishes of St. Catherine of Siena in Ithaca and Holy Cross in Dryden, according to Father Bernard L. Carges, pastor of Immaculate Conception.

The school's program for pre-kindergarten through grade five will continue to operate, he noted.

Twenty-eight students are enrolled in the middle-school program this year, Father Carges said, noting that only five children are in grade seven. He added that the enrollment figure fluctuates throughout the year.

Although the middle school has suffered from declining enrollment during the 1980s, school board President Frank Kempf said this year's drop to 28 from the 1990-91 level of 44 students was the most dramatic the school had ever seen.

Total enrollment for the school is about 148 students, Kempf said. Parish and school officials noted that the program for pre-K through grade eight

needs 200-220 students to operate on a sound financial basis.

Deacon James Hankey, business manager at Immaculate Conception, said the school currently suffers a deficit of about \$100,000. He also noted that when the school planned its 1991-92 budget, it overestimated its enrollment, and had originally expected a deficit of \$70,000.

Closing the middle school should save Immaculate Conception about \$60,000 a year in operating costs, Kempf said.

When asked how many teaching positions would be eliminated by the closing, Deacon Hankey said he could not give a specific figure due, in part, to the fact that some middle school teachers also instruct elementary classes.

Most Catholic children in the Ithaca area attend the region's public and non-Catholic private schools — a fact painfully acknowledged by opponents and supporters of the closing alike.

Unlike Immaculate Conception, which boasts few extracurricular activities, the area's public schools offer such features as sports teams and various clubs, several observers said.

Jane Marrer, the school board's recording secretary, said she knew of parents who had switched their children to public schools after fifth grade at Immaculate Conception because they wanted their children to be exposed to a larger number of academic and extracurricular activities.

However, some parents who do send their children to Immaculate Conception's middle school lacked commitment to keeping the school open, said Marrer, who coordinates a semiweekly bingo game that brings in \$70,000 for the school each year.

Such parental apathy was the very

reason Father Carges decided to vote for the middle school closing.

"I don't see the commitment that I would expect from Catholic parents if they are so interested in Catholic education," he said.

Yet one school parent and school board member said he was disappointed that the board voted to close the middle school without first consulting the school parents.

"I've talked to people who really felt parents were closed out of this process," said Richard Marisa, who was absent for the vote to close the school. He said he missed the meeting because the board did not provide enough advance notice of its scheduling.

Marisa, who oversees recruitment efforts for Immaculate Conception's elementary grades, said that the vote to close the middle school precludes any efforts to mount a similar recruiting effort on behalf of the sixth, seventh and eighth grades.

Kempf claimed, however, that such an effort would only have recruited problem students for the school.

"If you have a child switch into

school from sixth or seventh grade ... chances are you are looking at an academic or disciplinary problem," he said.

Parents generally only transfer their children into middle schools when they are moving from one place to another, or when the children have found it hard to succeed in neighboring schools, he said.

Kempf also said that the school board appealed to the diocese and several area corporations for financial help, but was turned away empty handed.

Sister Mary Ann Binsack, director of diocesan Faith Development Ministries and acting superintendent of schools, was unavailable for comment on the middle school closing.

She did release a statement through a diocesan spokesman, however. She noted that the school board's recommendation to close the middle school will be submitted to the Commission on Clusters in mid-December.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark will review final recommendations by February, 1992, Sister Binsack said in her statement.

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