

Northern Flank by Göran Haglund

AIDS time bomb ignites in Sweden

Though a patient was operated on ten times, the 200 hospital workers involved weren't told she had AIDS.

The government's "human rights" policy on AIDS was all but shattered on July 6, as Swedish newspaper readers had their morning coffee go down the wrong way, reading the gory details of the lethal danger to which surgeons and nurses had been exposed by not being told that a patient was AIDS infected.

A 60-year-old woman, undergoing surgery for tumors, was AIDS-infected several years ago. This was detected by one Stockholm hospital, but the doctors' professional secrecy prevented the information from reaching a second Stockholm hospital, where the patient was undergoing surgery.

The surgeons at the second hospital, Karolinska, learned about the AIDS infection only after the patient had died. When informed about the patient's death, a relative revealed that the patient had been AIDS-infected through a blood transfusion several years ago. Since then, she had undergone surgery more than 10 times, and had been treated at both the intensive care and plastic surgery wards of the Karolinska Hospital.

During the last two operations alone, and the subsequent care, over 200 persons were involved, all of whom now have to be tested. The patient lost lots of blood during surgery—one operation lasted 15 hours—and this blood was not treated as contaminated. One nurse, taking a blood sample from the patient, inadvertently pricked herself with the needle. Others had skin contact with the patient's blood.

The surgeon in charge of the pa-

tient, Dr. Göran Jurell, said that had he known the patient was AIDS-infected, he wouldn't even have operated, as a person whose immunological system is impaired cannot pull through such extensive surgery.

"Maybe the patient died of AIDS. We don't know," Jurell said. "The worst thing is that the infection ward of the Danderyd Hospital, which detected the AIDS infection, didn't tell us. Especially as they knew very well that the operation would occur." Today, under the law "protecting" AIDS patients, a doctor detecting an AIDS infection can only appeal to the patient to voluntarily inform doctors at other hospitals he or she might visit.

Jurell called for testing of everyone who is to undergo surgery, and for treating anybody who refuses as if he or she were AIDS infected, as well as for hospitals to exchange information about who is infected.

The incident provoked a strong revival of the AIDS debate. Inger Ohlsson, chairwoman of the Hospital Employees' Trade Union, called for a central register of AIDS infected people, as it's impractical to test all patients just before an operation. Prof. Hans Wigzell at the Karolinska Institutet, a government AIDS policy-maker, said it's a "pity" the patient didn't say she was AIDS infected, but this is something we'll have to live (or, die?) with. The only alternative, Wigzell claimed, is a totally registered society.

Dr. Jan Wersäll, chief of the ear, nose, and throat ward at the Karolinska Hospital, announced he is routinely testing everybody who will undergo

surgery, unless the patient explicitly refuses—contrary to current rules stipulating testing only upon the patient's explicit request. "If society does not take its responsibility, at least we have to," he stated, and called for universal mandatory testing. "I am prepared to be sued to find out where the line will be drawn."

National media response varied from "human rights" apologies to calls for stronger measures. The liberal *Dagens Nyheter* wrote on July 8 that "testing must not be conducted so routinely that the tested is deprived of the chance to decide for himself. A person suspecting that he is AIDS infected, may have legitimate reasons for not wanting his suspicions confirmed."

The next day, the conservative *Svenska Dagbladet* attacked *Dagens Nyheter*, calling for mandatory testing, and pointing out that AIDS is not of concern only to those already infected. *Dagens Nyheter* counter-attacked, editorializing on July 11 that the conservative daily supports the AIDS policy of LaRouche! After complaining that *Svenska Dagbladet* called for universal mandatory testing, the liberal daily charged, "It is an argument supported in the U.S. almost exclusively by Lyndon LaRouche."

Local press covered an anti-AIDS campaign run by the Anti-Drug Coalition on the Baltic island of Gotland, whose usual 50,000 inhabitants triple in the summer. Under the headline, "The ADC Wants Mandatory Testing," *Gotlands Tidningar* wrote, "Poor-Sweden could eradicate TB, but Welfare-Sweden thinks it can't afford to stop AIDS." *Gotlands Allehanda* quoted ADC chairman Ulf Sandmark, charging that "the government lies to save money. . . . If we don't fight to put up the money, Sweden will adopt a new Nazi euthanasia policy already on its way in other countries."