AIDS in California

Proposition causes PANIC

San Francisco

Do people of California know better than state health officials how best to control the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS)? Supporters of Proposition 64, an initiative on the California ballot in the November election, believe they do. If the propositioncommanda majority in November, it will require the state to extend to AIDS the regulations now applying to other infectious diseases. Meanwhile, the proposition is opposed by health care professionals and the opponents of the extreme right.

According to the proposition’s sponsors, the ballot initiative merely “extends existing public health codes for communicable diseases to AIDS and AIDS virus carriers.” But opponents of the measure, including many state officials and health care professionals, believe the proposition is deceptive, and may only increase the threat of AIDS.

Among those who have arranged that the proposition should appear on the November ballot are the followers of Lyndon Laroche, a right-wing political extremist. Brian Lantz, a spokesman for the Prevent AIDS Now Initiative Committee (PANIC), says his group filed a petition with 600,000 signatures to get Proposition 64 on the ballot. Lantz says people are worried that health officials do not have all the answers about AIDS, and are not doing enough to protect the public from the disease.

As an example of persisting uncertainties about the transmission of the AIDS virus (HIV), Lantz points to the cluster of cases in Belle Glade, Florida. So far, he says, there has been no adequate explanation why Belle Glade should have so many AIDS cases.

It is unclear exactly what health officials will be required to do if Proposition 64 passes. Certainly, more people will be subjected to mandatory tests, and those found positive may be prevented from working in schools, health care facilities and food service occupations. Supporters of the measure say that, while it may not be mandatory that carriers of the virus should be in quarantine, that avenue should be left open. Indeed, PANIC regards quarantine as an acceptable and possibly necessary option for controlling the spread of AIDS. The proposition would also require reporting of carrier status to state health officials.

Proposition 64 has provoked tremendous opposition from the Californian medical and public health communities. James Chin, chief of the infectious disease branch of the State Department of Health Services, calls the proposition “absurd,” saying that public health officials are already taking the necessary steps to control the spread of AIDS. He denies that there is uncertainty about the transmission of AIDS, and that adding a new virus to the list of diseases with express consent for test is justified.

While Chin holds that infection by the AIDS virus is not a curiosity among infectious agents, the reporting requirements of Proposition 64 are especially troubling to health officials. Mervyn Silverman, director of the AIDS health services programme at the University of California, San Francisco, says that the social stigma of the disease and the possibility of quarantine will keep patients out of the health care system at the early stage of the disease when they could be helped. Lack of confidentiality about carrier status would dissuade people from voluntarily submitting to blood testing, making it harder to keep track of the spread of HIV.

AIDS in Japan

Test-kit market opens up

Tokyo

Faces this month, Japan’s will screen all blood donors in Japan for acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and adult T-cell leukemia (ATL). The decision opens up a huge market for makers of antibody test kits with an estimated budget of $2.3 million ($22.5 million) for the screening programme. So far, six carriers of AIDS antibodies have been found among about 900,000 donors in the Tokyo and Osaka areas. The official number of AIDS cases in Japan has risen to 21, 13 of which have proved fatal.

There have been calls for mandatory AIDS and ATL screening of blood donors in Japan since last year when the first AIDS cases were reported and the dangers of ATL infection through blood transfusion became apparent (Nature 218, 306, 1985). But the Health and Welfare Ministry decided to introduce only partial screening earlier this year.

ATL seems to pose a more immediate threat to the nation’s blood supplies than AIDS. More than 35,000 people with antibodies to the ATL retrovirus (HTLV-I) have been found among about 700,000