

date 22

## Support network breaks down the barriers



● Illawarra AIDS Community Support Network carer Trish Regal making moves to help AIDS patients cope.

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Picture: LES SMITH

It takes a very special sort of person to spend time with strangers who are dying of a horrible disease in an effort to give them some comfort.

When that disease is one with the stigma of AIDS, the person has to be even more special.

As a member of the Illawarra AIDS Community Support Network, Trish Regal, of Albion Park, is such a person.

There are two CSNs operating in the Illawarra. While the groups can be referred to AIDS or HIV positive patients through the Sexual Health Clinic at Port Kembla Hospital, they are autonomous from the clinic.

"We are a home hospice movement. Our aim is to provide help in any way we can for people with full-blown AIDS or who are still HIV positive," Mrs Regal said.

"We do everything from change their beds, shopping, massage and keeping them mobile. The most important thing is to be there for

## Trish offers comfort to AIDS victims

them. Because AIDS has such a stigma attached to it, patients often find it hard to talk to their families about their condition."

Mrs Regal said everything is done in complete confidentiality and the only people who know the identity of the patient they are caring for is the carer and the co-ordinator.

"When we discuss problems, we don't even use the patient's Christian name," she said.

Mrs Regal has cared for four AIDS patients, two of which have died.

"The first one was hard ... the second one

was hard too," she said.

"We are not judgmental, that is not what we are there for. There is a screening process where people who are not equipped to cope will naturally drop out, others will work their way through their prejudices.

"We don't offer physical care, ours isn't a medical role.

"We are there for them to talk to, to help their family and to scream at, if that's what they want."

Mrs Regal said she wasn't surprised at the number of AIDS patients in the Illawarra. She said she joined the support network because while people and the media talk about statistics and the stigmas attached to the disease, each statistic was a frightened dying person.

"I wanted to help them," she said.

The CSN will have a direct pager number within a month, but in the meantime they can be contacted through Port Kembla Hospital's Sexual Health Clinic on 7440444, through a Sydney number 02 2122728, or after hours on 849091.

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