

—Remember — AIDS victims are human beings—

Trish gives solace to sick

By YVETTE ROPER

For Trish Regal, contact with AIDS sufferers is a wonderful and far from deadly experience.

Trish spoke openly about her experience as a volunteer carer on the eve of World AIDS Day in a bid to dispel some of the myths which have infected the community and led to the ostracism of sufferers and even carers.

For the last three years the 39-year-old Albion Park woman has been caring for AIDS sufferers in her spare time.

She volunteered when her anger at community ignorance became too much.

"There was an awful lot of anger directed at specific groups of people and it made me angry that people were being subjected to that because of their sexuality," Mrs Regal said.

"I felt I had to do something."

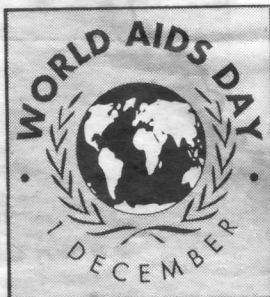
Of the seven sufferers Trish has helped through a Community Support Network program, all but one have died.

Being a volunteer carer can involve anything from cooking, cleaning and massaging a sufferer, to going out for lunch, or just offering an understanding ear.

This emotional input has



● Trish Regal ... cares for AIDS sufferers who might otherwise die alone.



taken its toll on Trish, who for the moment has withdrawn from hands-on caring and instead helps with program administration.

"It's emotionally draining work," Mrs Regal said.

"Even though you know they have an illness and they will die, it's still shattering."

Trish said the need for such a service is great because in many cases without volunteers like herself, AIDS sufferers would be left to die alone.

She said caring for AIDS sufferers is no different to helping other sick people and has provided her with many memorable experiences.

"The major difference is it is socially acceptable to have cancer and to be dying of old age," she said.

Mrs Regal said Wollongong is a particularly difficult place for sufferers to die, because of the sheltered attitudes which have led to some patients denying they have AIDS.

"There's a lot of homophobia around here which has not helped," she said.

"Some have had a family around them that didn't know what was wrong with them, or thought they had cancer."

Such misconceptions have also led to people seeing her involvement as strange.

Illawarra equally at risk

The number of Illawarra people infected with the HIV virus or full blown AIDS is doubling every year, according to a local expert.

Port Kembla Hospital's Sexual Health Clinic services director Dr Ross Price said reported HIV or AIDS cases has trebled since the centre was established in 1986.

In the last five years the centre had treated more than 70 people. However, Dr Price said the real figure for the number of AIDS sufferers was probably greater, because many chose to see their own doctor, or travel to Sydney for treatment.



● DR PRICE

"We have seen an increase in the numbers of the disease," Dr Price said.

"But the true prevalence of it we don't know. We only see the tip of the iceberg here."

Dr Price said while a breakdown of that figure showed gays or bi-sexuals were the most affected, the ethnic community also was at risk.

Figures indicated increasing occurrence of the disease in people of non-English speaking backgrounds.

Also of increasing concern was sufferers being slow to report symptoms. There are four stages to the disease: sero conversion, asymptomatic, symptomatic (HIV infection) and AIDS.

"We are seeing late stage presentation of the condition," Dr Price said.

"It means people are presenting when they are sick. It's very worrying because we are not seeing the people who turn from positive to negative."

Dr Price told an International HIV medicine conference, at the Northbeach Parkroyal last weekend, there was a false community perception Wollongong was not affected like Sydney.

"We have got the problem of rural isolation. Although it's perceived HIV is a Sydney condition it's not. It's a problem here locally and we are not in isolation and therefore we have to address it," he said.

Regional AIDS co-ordinator Kerry Banks said Wollongong statistics contributed considerably to a Statewide division of low and high prevalence areas.