AIDS not a "social disease"

SIR — The author of "No need for panic about AIDS" (*Nature* 28 April, p.749) wrote against the temptation to see AIDS as a twentieth century Sodom and Gomorrah. Strange then, that by the end of the article she/he could not resist the temptation of standing in the place of God and hurl fire and brimstone at gay men. Shortly after commenting that AIDS was not "especially infectious" the author goes on to imply that gay men are a "threat to public health" because of their "pathetic promiscuity". After offering no evidence that the recreational use of drugs such as amyl nitrite is implicated in AIDS, the author suggests that their use be discouraged. Finally, the writer suggests that gay men change their lifestyles, concluding with the thought that "the fear of AIDS will no doubt help" in turning us all from sinful paths.

Such tedious moralism might well suit the pages of a polemical religious tract but it ill-becomes *Nature*.

JONATHAN GREVESON

London E8, UK

SIR — Your News and Views article, "No need for panic about AIDS" (*Nature* 28 April, p.749) is at best unhelpful. To begin at the end, in the last paragraph innuendos in phrases such as "pathetic promiscuity of male homosexuals" and assisting "the mechanics of male homosexuality" suggest that there might be a bias in the piece along the lines that panic about AIDS could be expected to increase in proportion to the effect of the epidemic on heterosexuals.

The writer also seems to be unaware of reports from Belgium (*Lancet* 19 March, p.642) and France (*Lancet* 26 March, p.700) of AIDS in black Africans, particularly natives of, or visitors to, Zaire. None of these people, incidentally, were known to be homosexuals. These data and the incidence of AIDS amongst Haitians ought surely to be looked at in the context of another *Lancet* report (12 March, p.545) that solarium exposure can produce immunological disorders in otherwise normal (and presumably heterosexual) subjects analogous to those in AIDS patients.

Following a suggestion by Dr Alex Comfort (*Br. J. sexual Med.* September 1982, p.4), moreover, research in Los Angeles amongst male homosexual volunteers has demonstrated a connection between homosexual behaviour, specifically the passive role in anal intercourse, and immunodeficiency, though the T-cell imbalance differs from that characteristic of AIDS (*Lancet* 19 March, p.609). Both the authors of this report and the work of three New York physicians, Sonnabend, Witkin and Purtilo (unpublished in March 1983), found evidence that allogeneic semen may promote immune suppression.

Nor does the author note the significant difference between the number of AIDS cases reported in the United States and in

Europe. With 29 in France (a minority being male homosexuals), 5 in Belgium, 14 reported so far in the United Kingdom, and between 10 and 20 in the rest of Europe, the imbalance is striking. Any attempt to understand AIDS short of the isolation of a new infectious agent must explain why two regions with similar cultures, populations and numbers of homosexual men should be so differently affected. I have learned to expect more from *Nature* than this partial and prudish review.

RICHARD B. FISHER

London N1, UK

SIR — As a statement about what we know and don't know about AIDS, your piece "No need for panic about AIDS" (*Nature* 28 April, p.749) is muddled and confusing. It also is dated and not well-informed.

But I am alarmed that a journal with the high standing that *Nature* enjoys in the scientific community could possibly say AIDS is a "social problem". Or that AIDS can be described simply as "disturbing" (rather than, say, frightening) in light of the high mortality involved.

And how on earth can you say that we needn't be deeply concerned about AIDS because "the numbers of people among whom the disease has been recognized in the past few years is of the order of a thousand most of whom are male homosexuals". How many human beings must be afflicted — how many people must die — before we need to pay attention to a disease . . . or a "social problem"? Or are numbers of human beings not important because most of those affected can be labelled "male homosexuals"?

And tell me, pray, why the vicious opinions expressed in the final paragraph of the piece belong in any scientific journal, much less in *Nature*? The hatred of "male homosexuals" distilled in phrases such as "male homosexuals should be persuaded to change their ways", "the pathetic promiscuity of male homosexuals is the most obvious threat to public health" and "use of substances such as amyl nitrite to assist the mechanics of male homosexuality" is a disgrace to the trust that your readers place in your publication.

JOHN TERRELL

State University of New York
at Binghamton,
New York, USA

● Not unnaturally, this is a contentious subject. The starting point for the article complained of was the danger, still extant, that proper concern about the origin of AIDS may engender public alarm. Nobody suggests that the causation of AIDS is anything but a medical and scientific problem, but is the "social problem that has arisen" — for blood transfusion services — negligible? Similarly, nobody expects that male homosexuals will cease to be homosexual, just that they should be aware of the dangers of promiscuity and of the use of amyl nitrite. — Editor, *Nature*.

Sterling and research

SIR — Your leading article, and the report by Philip Campbell (*Nature* 5 May, pp. 1 and 4) rightly draw attention to a deplorable state of affairs. Research programmes currently relying on Science and Engineering Council (SERC) support are to have funds suddenly withdrawn (about £1 million from each board of SERC), and the whole future of particle physics research is placed in grave jeopardy. All this is a result of the fall in the value of sterling which has raised SERC's international commitments by about £4 million this year. Worse may follow, since changes in contributions which are related to gross national product could lead to an even greater deficit.

Of the international contributions paid from the SERC budget, the largest goes to CERN, the laboratory at Geneva which furnishes the very large and expensive machines necessary for experiments in particle physics. SERC takes the view that short-falls in international subscriptions should be "recovered" from the budgets of the appropriate research areas. If present estimates are correct, the effect on particle physics research in the coming years would be devastating: the support British university physicists depend on for their experiments would be about halved, forcing them to break commitments made with physicists of other countries to share in the cost and effort of doing experiments, and seriously damaging preparation now under way across Europe to use the new accelerator, LEP, being built at CERN.

CERN is not a remote money-consuming international organization, it is *our* laboratory for experimental particle physics. Like most of our nearly 2,000 colleagues from European universities who use CERN, we have no facilities for this research in our own country. Britain has helped, through our contributions over 25 years and the efforts of our physicists, to make CERN what it is today — the leading laboratory in its field in the world. This is an achievement the country, and SERC, should be proud to share; it is a great success which deserves enthusiastic support, not grudging acceptance because it is too difficult to leave!

SERC should shoulder its responsibility for basic research in the universities and secure a guarantee that the Treasury will provide the currency committed to international subscriptions, as is the case in most other countries.

With respect for the authority of your journal, I cannot believe that Mrs Thatcher — who has shown a warm interest in the recent discoveries at CERN — really accepts that basic research in the universities should be such a desperate hostage to the capricious fortunes of sterling.

JOHN MULVEY

Nuclear Physics Laboratory,
University of Oxford, Oxford, UK