



The British Columbia Persons With AIDS Society seeks to empower persons living with HIV disease and AIDS through mutual support and collective action. The Society has over 3,500 HIV+ members.

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Living + Magazine
1107 Seymour St.
Vancouver BC
V6B 5S8

TEL 604.893.2206

FAX 604.893.2251

EMAIL living@bcpwa.org

BCPWA ONLINE www.bcpwa.org

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opinion and editorial

Can we talk?

by Carl Bogнар

Nearly 200 HIV-positive people attended the BCPWA Society's Positive Gathering in October to participate in sessions on antiretrovirals, complementary medicines, co-infection, and methadone, among others. One of the surprises of the Gathering was that the most popular sessions dealt with depression and relationships, which provides a clue, I think, to the deepest concerns of PWAs.

At a workshop on prevention, people discussed the difficulties of maintaining safer behaviours to prevent HIV transmission. The discussion was lively and compelling, and people shared their experiences with remarkable openness. They spoke of love, rejection, trust, depression, desire, discrimination, passion, death, disclosure, loss, stigma, and the way these issues affect safer behaviours.

Just as compelling was the relief and gratitude that HIV-positive people expressed at having a safe venue in which to talk. PWAs have few opportunities to express their deepest concerns and the complex situations they must deal with. One focus of prevention strategies is to ensure PWAs keep talking, both among ourselves and with HIV-negative people. In this spirit, the tagline for the BCPWA Society's new prevention campaign is "We need to talk about it."

Despite the alarming numbers of new infections in British Columbia (440 in 2001 alone), the numbers show that things have already changed for the better. New HIV infections peaked at about

750 cases a year between 1990 and 1996. It is difficult to know whether the increase to 440 cases in 2001 from 427 in 1999 and 413 in 2000 is significant. Epidemiologists fear that the increase in 2001 may point to a resurgence in the epidemic. In any event, 440 cases a year is far too many. Each new infection will cost the BC healthcare system over \$200,000. That's nearly \$100 million for the new cases diagnosed last year alone. Yet it's still difficult to secure funding for prevention campaigns.

People with HIV/AIDS are living longer and healthier lives than ever, so there are more opportunities for HIV transmission. Despite the huge increase in the overall number of positive people, 300 fewer new cases of HIV are reported each year than were reported six years ago. One possible explanation for the reduction in new cases is that HIV-positive people are already dealing with many of the situations where HIV transmission can be avoided. Most likely, HIV transmission results from a mixed bag of complex situations that PWAs encounter.

After someone is diagnosed with HIV, a lot of time, effort, caring, and communication are needed to rebuild a healthy life. Effective prevention can only be built on the healthy sexuality and good mental health of HIV-positive people. This may be the biggest challenge for HIV prevention, but it just might be the key to slowing the spread of the virus. ⊕

Carl Bogнар is the prevention coordinator for the BCPWA Society.

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