



Out in the open

Studies suggest that disclosing your sexuality and HIV status can be good for your health

by R. Paul Kerston

Some people wonder about the differences between being gay with HIV and being straight with HIV. Now there's proof that there may be an important difference between living both openly gay and openly HIV-positive—or not living openly.

Results from a Seattle study, published in *Psychosomatic Medicine*, showed that CD4 cell counts actually go up in individuals who disclose both sexual orientation as well as HIV-positive status compared to those who don't. While the researchers aren't advocating such disclosure, nor saying it's a strategy for improved health outcomes, the study seems to indicate a benefit to those who disclose—a benefit that argues against the stigma and other still all-too-common consequences of such actions.

Between 1994 and 2004, seven studies dealt with, among other issues, the subject of psychological inhibition—simply defined as not publicly expressing significant private experiences—and its relationship to such things as a faster decrease in CD4 cell counts, or worse. Researchers theorize that psychological inhibition puts stress on immune function.

In a related but different study result, James W. Pennebaker, of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and his colleagues found that expressing thoughts and feelings about a significant event, over time, led to fewer doctor visits. However, in a study entitled “The role of disclosure in coping with HIV infection,” published in *AIDS Care* in 1998, researchers showed that newly-diagnosed HIV-positive gay men were unlikely to disclose their serostatus at least until they came to terms with the news.

The latest information comes from 373 psychiatric patients who were evaluated in a study conducted at the University of Washington School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences in Seattle over a four-year period. The study was published as “Disclosure of HIV

Status and Sexual Orientation Independently Predicts Increased Absolute CD4 Cell Counts Over Time for Psychiatric Patients.” The researchers took the hypothesis that disclosure of sexual orientation improved immune function and went a further step in exploring “whether concealment of HIV status has an effect on immune function” in similar fashion.

The objective of this 2007 study was to see if disclosure of HIV status within a psychiatric setting had the same effect of raising CD4 counts as gay people's self-outing. Investigators found that “consistent disclosure of both sexual orientation and HIV status independently”—and the word “independently” is key here—“predicted increased CD4 cell counts over time.” The authors therefore conclude that “relieving potential psychological distress by disclosing sexual orientation and HIV status has a positive impact on CD4 cell counts over time, even among outpatients stressed by psychiatric illness and economic disadvantage.”

These results have implications for the potential benefits of disclosure in Vancouver, given the parallels between Seattle, where the study was conducted, and Vancouver: a large gay community, pervasive homelessness, single-room occupancy hotel population, the many people receiving government economic assistance, and the many people who are unable to access necessary psychiatric health-care in BC. The last words in this study are instructive: “Additional research is needed to understand whether and under what conditions disclosure should be part of HIV disease management.”

Yeah, isn't that the truth. ☺

R. Paul Kerston is BCPWA's treatment outreach coordinator and community representation and engagement coordinator.

