

Status Talk

Thirty years ago

In 1981, gay men in California and New York began to show up in hospitals with Kaposi's Sarcoma, a rare form of cancer usually found only among either older Mediterranean or Jewish men or young adult African men, and/or Pneumocystis Pneumonia Carinii (PCP), generally only found in individuals with seriously compromised immune systems. These men did not fit the script for either condition. No one knew why so many people who were getting sick were gay or what was causing the cancer and pneumonia. By mid-1982 the symptoms had become prevalent enough to spur the Center for Disease Control (CDC) into action. Though they still didn't really understand what was causing the Kaposi's Sarcoma, or the PCP, they gave the complex of symptoms a name: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). It was a scary time, especially in the gay community. One to two people (mostly men who had sex with men) were being diagnosed with AIDS every day and by 1988, 45,000 people, most of whom were gay or bi-sexual men, had died.

Even though scientists discovered HIV - the virus that causes AIDS - in 1984, governmental officials and religious leaders viewed AIDS as moral reckoning and stood by and watched as members of our community died. They refused to back safer sex education and needle exchange programs that most likely would have reduced the rate of infection. Their message was simple. "Just say no." In other words, "Don't do it, and if you do, well, you can die with the consequences of your immoral behavior." People (again mostly gay and bisexual men) continued to die a brutal death. Physically, people with AIDS were wasting away and sliding into dementia. Socially, they were often shunned by their families and friends and treated like shit by medical professionals who "forgot" the Hippocratic Oath and treated HIV-positive patients with disrespect or refused to treat them at all. This stigma followed many AIDS victims into death because many funeral homes refused to touch HIV infected bodies.

Silence Equals Death

In 1987, drawing parallels between Nazi policies towards homosexuals during the holocaust and the social and political response to AIDS in the 1980's, six gay activists in New York plastered posters featuring a pink triangle on a black background stating 'SILENCE = DEATH' around the city. They made the point that 'silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival.' This became a rallying cry of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and prompted many people to speak out and take action. Perhaps as a result, by 1997,

pharmaceutical companies had developed a “cocktail” of drugs that kept the virus at bay in infected people. This meant that that contracting HIV was no longer a death sentence.

AIDS at 30: Silence Still Equals Death.

Despite extensive research, scientists have yet to find either a vaccine or a cure for HIV. Although fewer people are dying of AIDS, the HIV infection rate has not gone down since the mid-1990's. The CDC documents nearly 50,000 new HIV infections each year. Over half of these involve male to male sexual contact. In Ohio, two-thirds of all new HIV cases involve gay and bisexual men. According to CDC estimates, transgender people and young men of color who have sex with men are at particularly high risk of infection.

While much of the responsibility for the continuation of the epidemic falls on the shoulders of political leaders who refused to fund safer sex and HIV prevention education and needle exchange programs and instead advocated ineffective abstinence only education, at the end of the day it is our community who bears the brunt of the disease. We still have to keep breaking the silence in order to protect our community and ourselves.

First we have to keep pressuring politicians to fund safer sex and other evidence based HIV prevention programs. We also have to stay aware of political fighting as it relates to treatment for HIV-positive people. Obama's Health Care Reform promises to have beneficial effects for people who are HIV-positive by expanding Medicaid eligibility, allowing state AIDS Drug Assistance Programs (ADAPs) to pay “true out of pocket costs” associated with the Medicare Part D “donut hole.” Health Care Reform also protects HIV-positive people against insurance company discrimination based on health status and prior condition and promises to subsidize insurance for people making up to 400% of the federal poverty level. Since there doesn't seem to be a move in Washington to topple the insurance companies or at least push them to reduce their profit margin and upper management benefits packages by reducing costs and increasing coverage and services, this subsidy is very useful. However, Health Care Reform is not popular among some very powerful people and groups. The act is already on the Supreme Court's slate and political infighting could dismantle the reform completely. We have to fight for our rights no matter how the political winds change.

Second, we have to support agencies like the AIDS Resource Center that provide services to HIV-positive people, anonymous testing, and evidence based prevention programming.

Finally, we have to keep breaking the silence at a personal level. Not only do we need to talk about HIV with political leaders and community movers and shakers, we need to talk about HIV and other STD's with our sexual partners. This means we have to know our

status. Even if you don't think you have engaged in risky behavior, get tested. If you've engaged in risky sexual activities or shared needles since your last test, get tested again. Encourage your sexual partners to get tested as well.

Unless you are absolutely certain that you and your partner (or partners as the case may be) is (are) STD free and HIV-negative, engage in safer sex. Protect yourself and your partner(s) by using condoms, dental dams, latex surgical gloves, and/or plastic wrap. Remember to use latex condoms on your sex toys as well. And if you're too drunk, stoned or otherwise impaired to get that condom on correctly, you're probably too drunk stoned or otherwise impaired to have sex. Just a thought.

If you are HIV-positive, you need to tell your partner(s) before you have sex with them or at least as soon as you know. Finding out that someone knowingly withheld information about having an STD is a huge betrayal, especially if the sexual encounter results in the sharing of AIDS or some other STD. Positive status does not make you dangerous. It just means that it's important to take precautions.

If you are HIV-negative, don't be a jerk. Refusing to have sex with someone who is HIV-positive is not a legitimate prevention strategy. It's discrimination. Worse, it makes it harder for everyone to honestly talk about their STD and HIV-status and makes it less likely that the rate of infection will go down anytime soon.

To ask Regina a question, check out upcoming workshops, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com. This column originally appeared in Outlook: Everything is Political.