

# Brown Bags & HIV

## Demythologizing Women & AIDS

BY LYNN MCNICOL

The UVM Women's Center hosted a brown-bag lunch talk on Women and AIDS one sunny late September day with Kelly Brigham, the program specialist for prevention at Vermont CARES. Brigham was invited to speak by Tim Shriner, the Women's Center program coordinator, who felt there was a need for more health education.

Given a short hour to cover the worldwide epidemic, Brigham rattled off statistics and some important facts for the small gathering of female students. Among them:

▼ HIV is passed much more easily from men to women than from women to men.

▼ Untreated STDs, such as genital herpes, can increase a woman's risk of getting HIV during intercourse.

▼ Gynecological problems can sometimes be early signs of HIV.

▼ Women get more and different side effects than men, such as skin rashes and liver problems.

▼ Using condoms is the most effective way to prevent exposure to HIV during sex.

▼ African American and Hispanic women are currently getting infected with HIV at far higher rates than white women.

Brigham noted that there are only three ways that to get the virus: through unprotected sex or sharing needles with an infected person, or by drinking breast milk from an infected woman. Having anal sex is the riskiest, vaginal sex is somewhat less risky, and oral sex is the least likely to transmit HIV. Because of new screening procedures, blood transfusions are extremely unlikely to transmit HIV.

Anyone who believes she may have been exposed to HIV should get tested right away, Brigham said. For anyone who believes she has been exposed to HIV, a "morning after" pill

for HIV is available in the form of PEP (post-exposure prophylactic). The pill is expensive and must be taken for as long as one to three months to be effective. If the person was sexually assaulted, he or she will be given the medication free of charge, Brigham said.

Currently, a total of about 600 Vermonters are estimated to be living with HIV, Brigham said. The percentage of women infected (compared to men) is lower here – about 1/4 instead of half. State health department statistics have listed a total of only 181 people because the state lists only those who were diagnosed here, she said.

Worldwide, women are getting HIV and AIDS at an alarming rate, and Black and Hispanic women are especially at risk. From 1982 to 2000, the percentage of women newly diagnosed with AIDS more than tripled, from 6 percent to 25 percent. In the year 2000, Black and Hispanic women accounted for 80 percent of all

AIDS cases reported among women.

The rise in HIV and AIDS is not only hitting minority women especially hard, but many of those affected are young women or teenagers. According to federal health statistics, persons ages 13-24 represented 16 percent of new HIV cases during 1999-2000, and 48 percent of those were female.

The government also reports that HIV/AIDS was the third leading cause of death among African American women ages 25 to 44 in 1998.

"In that year, the AIDS death rate for African American women ages 25 to 44 was 21 times higher than the AIDS death rate for White women in the same age group," the Department of Health and Human Services reports.

There is a persistent myth that "women don't get" HIV/AIDS, Brigham said. Unfortunately, the millions of women's lives affected by HIV infection and AIDS are proving that myth wrong. Women do get HIV and AIDS and are vulnerable for several reasons. Sexual assault is one, since injury and lack of protection increase the risk of infection. Also, since many women around the world are sex workers for survival, they are at risk of contracting HIV from men,

who may also spread the virus to their wives.

It's far less likely for women to spread HIV to women, Brigham said. She knew of one documented case of a woman passing HIV to another woman through the shared use of sex toys that had not been properly cleaned. But woman-to-woman transmission of HIV may also be underreported: if a woman had previously had sex with a man or shared needles, then the diagnosis would be made based on the earlier, riskier behavior.

Anyone who believes they have been exposed to HIV should be tested as soon as possible, Brigham said. When the disease first made its appearance, people developing AIDS were living for only an average of three years. But with improved health care, information and medications, many are living for 20 years and more, she said. ▼

Vermont CARES provides free, anonymous walk-in HIV testing every Monday from 4-7 p.m. at 361 Pearl St. For more information, contact Kelly Brigham at 863-2437 ext.13 or email her at [kellyb@vtcares.org](mailto:kellyb@vtcares.org).

Lynn McNicol is a freelance writer who lives in Burlington.



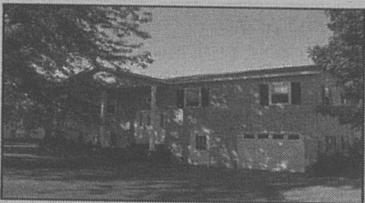
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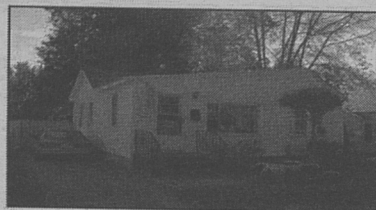
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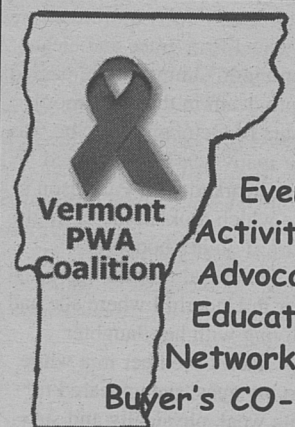
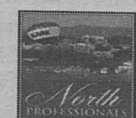
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Ext. 43



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Ext. 68



Vermont People  
With AIDS Coalition  
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