

Lesbians and AIDS

by Mimi DeSouza

To most people the title "Lesbians and AIDS" tends to portray a contradiction. Lesbians don't get AIDS- do they? Not so true, lesbians are the least at risk group for any sexually transmitted disease, but that doesn't mean they are safe from contracting the AIDS virus.

Most of the literature, scientific and otherwise, has concentrated on three sexual groups- homosexual and bisexual men and heterosexuals, much to the exclusion of lesbians. Women's periodicals have also been at fault for not representing the case of the lesbian and her risk for AIDS. Lesbians have become aware of the paucity of safer sex guidelines and facts surrounding lesbians and AIDS. Some have decided to voice their opinions and knowledge quite forcefully- as evident in a lengthy letter to *Off Our Backs* (Oct. 1988).

Whenever AIDS has been connected to women in the media it is with heterosexuals, IV drug users or prostitutes. That leaves lesbians with no place to turn for information. Even AIDS activist groups tend to forget the concerns of the sexually active lesbian. While many lesbians work with AIDS organizations and are knowledgeable on safer sex guidelines for gay men and heterosexuals, they may not be aware of the dangers that their sexual activities could pose to their health and how to reduce the risk of contracting or sexually transmitting diseases.

Lesbians in relationships which involve sexual practices which could lead to tearing of vaginal or anal membranes and actions which lead to bleeding can be considered less safe than ones which do not. Lesbians are unable to gauge their sexual practices according to a safer sex hierarchical order because their sexual activities are often excluded from safer sex booklets. Pamphlets which concentrate on semen ingestion and condoms have little to do with what lesbians prefer sexually. Just how likely is it to contract the AIDS virus from oral sex with a woman? The scientific experts claim little to no risk. Yet, they have excluded lesbians from their studies, so their knowledge can not be taken as scientific fact, only conjecture. Though extensive studies have shown that contact with blood can transmit the AIDS virus, studies on menstrual blood contact have been nonexistent.

Recent increases in the cases of women ages 25-30 suffering from Chronic

Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), previously known as Epstein-Barr Virus, should send up a flare to the scientific community. Especially since CFS is a disease which also effects the immune system. Instead the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has dismissed the clinical evidence because the symptoms do not fit into their list of symptoms for ARC and AIDS.

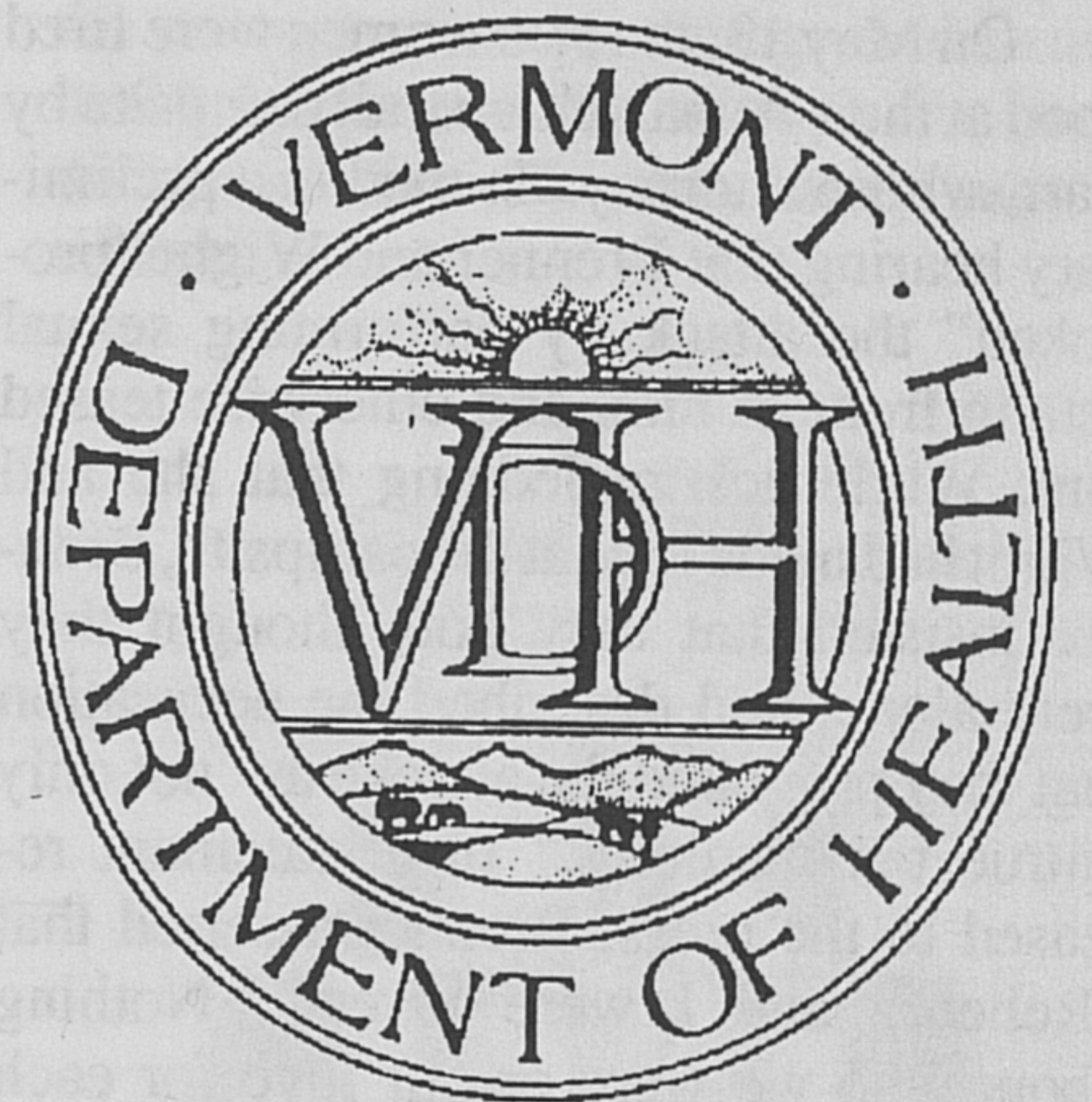
All this boils down to the fact that lesbians have to be just as careful as gay men and heterosexuals when engaging in sexual behaviors with their partners. Not just new partners, but even in relationships that have been together for a while. (Of course those relationships in which two virginal women came out to each other and became lovers can probably be excluded.)

Herein lies the common ties with AIDS and all sexual relationships. **KNOWING YOUR PARTNER!** Being truthful with each other is the most necessary element in the relationship. There are many factors to consider in women-women relationships. Is or was either of the women an IV drug user? Are or were either in a relationship with a man in which intercourse took place without a condom or semen swallowed? Because the incubation period for AIDS can be upwards of 10 years it is unlikely that a woman will know, without an AIDS antibody test, if any of her past sexual activities have led to contracting the virus.

Some lesbians advocate using latex dental dams as a protective device when engaging in oral sex. That is well and good but just as gay men were reluctant to use condoms, lesbians will have trouble accepting dental dams. The solution to the problem is already known, creative techniques need to be used in lesbian sexual practices. Just as some gay men have forgone anal and oral sex, lesbians might think of moving away from oral sex as the ultimate sexual activity. Lesbian sexual support groups are necessary in order for the development of AIDS awareness among lesbians and creating ideas for a less risky sexual environment. A perfect way to start such a group would be to contact the local AIDS support organization. (See VT CARES on the area resources page)

Lesbians must think about the consequences of their sexual practices so that they can feel safe about the health of their bodies in this time of AIDS.

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