

## "Human Rights & Public Health: A New Dynamic for Social Change"

BY CAREY V. JOHNSON,  
Gay & Bisexual Men's Program Coordinator

Last June I attended a fascinating week-long seminar at Harvard's School of Public Health, "Human Rights and Health: A New Perspective in Public Health," presented by Sofia Gruskin, an expert in international human rights law and practice, and Dr. Jonathan Mann, founding director of the World Health Organization's Global Program on AIDS and the current director of the Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard's School of Public Health. Founded in 1993, the Center is the world's first academic institute to focus exclusively on health and human rights.

Many of us, as gay men facing the community-wide challenges of HIV/AIDS or women fighting for improved breast cancer research and treatment, for example, possess an intimate, painful understanding of the ways our health needs are affected by social conditions that would deny or limit our equal rights. Facing a century of global conflict, genocide and epidemics, an increasing number of public health officials and human rights activists are seeking to reframe the way we address public health needs and human rights issues. Simply put, public health and human rights are inextricably interconnected.

The World Health Organization defines "health" as "a state of physical, mental, & social well-being" (note that "spiritual" has yet to be incorporated), and public health "ensures the conditions in which people can be healthy." But what are these conditions? Ironically, Rudolph Virchow, a pioneer of the public health movement a century ago, identified socio-economic factors such as poverty as key elements impacting disease, disability, and premature death. However, by their very nature public health programs are extensions of the state, and have too often participated in the perpetuation of the social conditions that contribute to poor health.

The modern concept of human rights provides a vital, coherent framework for analysis and response to the root-societal causes of preventable disease, disability and prema-

ture death. Health professionals, human service providers and anyone interested in positive social change have at least three primary reasons to be informed about and engaged with human rights:

1) The health policies and programs we design and implement can either burden or promote human rights.

2) Providers and activists who are informed about human rights can help identify health impacts of human rights violations and thereby contribute to informed public discussion, knowledge, and action.

3) As we become more aware of this interrelationship, we become profoundly aware of our individual and collective dignity and its value in a healthy society.

In commemoration of October as Vermont AIDS Awareness Month and October 11th as National Coming Out Day, I will be presenting "Hu-

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man Rights and Public Health: A New Dynamic for Social Change" Tuesday, October 14, 1997 7 PM at Everyone's Books, 23 Elliot Street, Brattleboro. The interactive evening will provide an introduction to modern human rights thinking and practice, including the core human rights documents, and explore

the practical applications of modern human rights to the challenges of health promotion, disease prevention, and positive social change. FMI call me at (802) 254-4444 or e-mail: careymms@sover.net

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You don't get it from toilet seats.  
You don't get it from coffee cups. You don't get it from desk tops in a school room.  
It doesn't fly through the air or swim around in hot tubs.  
You don't catch it from shaking hands, kissing, sneezing, wrestling or dancing.

According to the Surgeon General, your best protection against AIDS, barring abstinence, is use of a condom. For the facts about AIDS, call the Vermont AIDS Hotline.

## VERMONT AIDS HOTLINE: 1-800-882-AIDS

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60 Main Street, P.O. Box 70, Burlington, Vermont 05402