

B Y K A T I E M O L L O Y

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Last month, thousands of Canadian university students discarded the pamphlets about AIDS and "safe sex" that were distributed on campuses across the country. They decided such information wasn't relevant to them because they are straight and not promiscuous.

But as the AIDS epidemic makes its way into the heterosexual community, straight people can no longer reassure themselves that they will be spared since AIDS is "just a gay disease". Now straight

But it's so much easier to educate gay people about AIDS because they're so aware. Straights, on the other hand, think, "It's not going to touch me."

McNeil says part of the problem stems from the lack of a suitable federal government response to AIDS and the lack of a national strategy. Referring to the government's recent advertisements on AIDS, McNeil says the two options — to cut down on sexual activity or to use a condom — are transmitting "massively incorrect" information.

"Cutting down means nothing. It's immaterial if you're not practising safer sex. It only takes that one time and then you've exposed yourself to the virus. So the priority is wrong," says McNeil.

"I bet if you ask any straight male if they use condoms they'll say, 'Well, my girlfriend's on the pill.' To hell with that. That isn't safe sex," says McNeil.

Andy Ray, a third-year science student at Carleton, says although AIDS is something very much talked about, most heterosexual people don't really concern themselves with getting AIDS.

"People don't think about AIDS when they're drunk. They just want to get laid. McNeil says this attitude is part of the problem: heterosexuals just don't see the need for self-denial.

"People will delude themselves and take an easier choice to maintain their sexual relations," says McNeil.

McNeil says there is no such thing as a high-risk group for AIDS, as gay men are alleged to be. Instead, there are high-risk activities, which increase the chance of coming into contact with HIV, the virus believed to cause AIDS.

Rob Craft, a first-year arts student, says he thinks the AIDS issue is getting through to the public but still sees it as a "gay disease".

"It's something you see as not affecting you. You more or less think they (gay people) are the ones who started it."

A member of Gay People at Carleton (GPAC), Rick Phillips, says it's unfortunate how heterosexuals see gay people as the only ones to get AIDS.

"They think because they're straight that it's not going to happen to them. People wouldn't stop and pick up any of the literature at the GPAC table (during orientation week) because they're afraid people will think they're fags."

But Phillips admits university students are generally more educated than most young adults about AIDS.

"You would just think people at university would have more divergent opinions. You come to university to go after that quest for knowledge. I hope for their sake they're well-educated about AIDS."

According to a recent MacLean's Magazine report on AIDS, the two main factors responsible for spreading fear about AIDS are the lack of scientific knowledge about the disease and the fact that it's the only communicable disease that gives no evidence of its presence. The report also says the virus may lie dormant for an average of eight years in people who have been infected by blood transfusions.

This is the reason for the push towards safe sex. Eight years ago, AIDS was unknown. Today it's taken the lives for 657 Canadians. While there are 1,239 reported cases in Canada, worldwide the count has risen to 55,278. By 1991, it's expected to reach as high as three million. It's not just a disease, it's an epidemic.

Yet while the forecast for the spread of AIDS is not encouraging, Mary O'Brien predicts fear of the virus will foster a more compassionate approach to sexual relationships.

"AIDS makes students more cautious and not so quick to get into a sexual relationship. Unfortunately, a lack of trust will develop, in the sense of questioning a person's past, but there will be a lot more communication (between partners) and less casual sex," she said.

Keith Tomasek, a third-year student in Carleton's film program, agrees that people are becoming much more conservative in their sexual activity.

"People aren't as liberal as they used to be about sex. Society has tightened up — not just because of the AIDS thing but it

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people have to consider the options of "safe sex" or "no sex".

The American College Health Association (ACHA) defines AIDS as the breakdown of the body's defense system, producing susceptibility to some diseases. It is acquired rather than inherited and as a syndrome, it has a spectrum of disorders and symptoms. The human immunodeficiency (HIV) virus, identified positively only four years ago by scientists, has been found in blood, semen, saliva, and tears. Indirectly, it kills by weakening the body's natural immunity to a variety of infections and malignancies.

Dr. Mary O'Brien, director of health services at Carleton university, says there still has to be a lot more education on how AIDS is spread and how to have safe sex.

"The biggest myth is that people think they're going to contract AIDS by things like giving blood . . . The only mistake students can make is if they're not informed."

But Grant McNeil, spokesperson for the AIDS Committee of Ottawa, says the biggest myth about AIDS is it's still a gay disease.

"Gay people are getting very tired of hearing about AIDS and I don't blame them because they're the most impacted.

BETTER A SAFE THAN SORRY.

Unsafe sex can kill.
Use condoms to protect yourselves.

Safe ads for safe sex.

does have something to do with it. I know two people who have died of AIDS. It's very bizarre. When you see that happen, you know it's serious," said Tomasek.

McNeil shares O'Brien's hope that AIDS will make people more responsible about sex.

"AIDS has forced people to talk to their partner before sex about sexual histories. So people will be opening up rather than just jumping into bed without any discussions," McNeil said.

According to Optima Consultants, a polling agency, who did a report on AIDS in April, 80 per cent of the population in the National Capital Region feel the government should place more priority on fighting AIDS than on any other serious health condition.

Although 96 per cent of the public said they realize not only gays can contract AIDS, 35 per cent said they view gays as principally responsible for spreading AIDS. Only one per cent of the gay population had the same view. But the majority of heterosexual people (54 per cent) and gay people (84 per cent) said those who engage in casual sex with different partners are principally responsible for spreading the disease.

However, as the ACHA says in one pamphlet on safe sex, while the risk of AIDS can be reduced by reducing the number of sexual partners, it's inaccurate to equate AIDS with promiscuity. But to reduce the risk of contracting AIDS or any other sexually transmitted disease (STD), the ACHA advises you to know your sexual partner well before having sex.

The ACHA says STDs are spread by bacteria and viruses moving from one person to another. The micro-organisms travel in body fluids like semen, blood and vaginal mucus and can be transmitted if the person is not protected. Therefore, the ACHA advises that you avoid the exchange of bodily fluids during sex, especially since condoms haven't been proven to eliminate the risk of AIDS. The ACHA also suggests avoiding any injury to body tissues, refraining from using or sharing any intravenous drugs, not mixing alcohol or drugs with sexual encounters (because you might forget to use a condom), and not sharing razors or toothbrushes.

The ACHA also stresses in their pamphlets that AIDS is not just a gay disease. "Nice people get herpes and straight people get AIDS."



**BANG.
YOU'RE DEAD!**

Blatant or obnoxious? Only our American cousins will know for sure.

First-year students at Dalhousie received information packages dealing with the AIDS issue. Included in the package was information from the Red Cross, Health and Welfare Canada, and the local Metro Area Committee on AIDS.

Each package also included a condom, perhaps to emphasize that the practice is just as important as the theory.

One second-year student at Dalhousie says it's unfortunate that this information was not included in previous years' orientation kits.

"I know lots of guys who are very sexually active and it may make them more aware of the dangers. It's not important whether everyone will take the information seriously. What is important is that the information is there to dispel all the myths that are circulating," he says.

A first-year Dal student thought the information was needed and long overdue. "Students need this sort of information (on AIDS) to make informed decisions. Ignorance breeds mistakes," she says.

1500 packages were handed out to students, and although it would be hard to gauge how effective the information was, Student Union President Caroline Zayid says her office didn't receive any negative feedback for distributing the information.

Dalhousie currently has only two condom machines on the campus, both located in the men's washroom on the first floor of the Student Union Building. The warning sticker on the machines states, "Not sold for the prevention of disease or birth control".

The Student Union is now considering putting more machines in the building, in both the men's and women's washrooms. The new machines will feature advertising concerned with safe sex.

SETTING IT STRAIGHT

AS THE WAR ON AIDS MOVES INTO HIGH GEAR, SOME CRITICS QUESTION THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MESSAGES WE'RE RECEIVING.

ARE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ANY BETTER INFORMED?