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University health officials warn of AIDS danger

By Jason Keuter
Emerald Contributor

College students shouldn't forget the dangers of AIDS, say three University officials who attended a summer conference in San Diego titled "HIV Prevention: Progress Through Cooperation."

Foremost among the topics was how AIDS education could be taught more effectively to college students who have been hearing less and less about AIDS, despite the fact the disease continues to spread, said Joanie Robertson, the University's assistant dean of students. Robertson was one of the participants at the conference.

In addition to Robertson, Joanne Frank, director of the Peer Health Education Program, and Judy Moffett, nurse supervisor at the Student Health Center, were among some of the participants from the University.

The University's effort to educate students on AIDS is being hampered by Measure 5 cuts, which resulted in the scheduled elimination of the University's School and Community Health department.

Exacerbating the problem is the stigma that AIDS is a "gay disease." When politicians decide on funding for AIDS education and research, they take this into account and the result is almost inevitably detrimental

to education efforts, Robertson said.

Frank said the elimination of the University's health department will cause many problems. First among these is the elimination of the health requirement for graduation.

The loss of this requirement means that students will no longer get much needed information about AIDS, Frank said.

There are no guarantees that incoming freshmen received adequate health education in high school, she said, because many schools have inadequate or non-existent health education programs.

"AIDS education is definitely in a state of crisis," Frank said.

The effects from the elimination of the health department are being felt before the program is gone, Frank said. In particular, the Peer Health Advising program is losing students because of the cuts.

"Health students are rushing to fulfill their requirements before the program is gone, so electives like peer advising lose students who are too busy taking the health classes they need to graduate," she said.

Moffett said peer advising is an important part of health education on campus, because it is important for AIDS educators to avoid sounding like a "nagging parent." At the conference, Moffett said the greatest

concern among the participants was the need to discover a language in which AIDS education can be taught without alienating college students.

The behavior of college students makes them a group particularly vulnerable to contracting HIV, Robertson said, "The disease is still with us, and people do know about it, but the behavior hasn't changed."

Robertson cited a University survey taken spring 1990, in which 47.5 percent of the students surveyed said that AIDS had affected their sex lives and 39.7 percent said they didn't feel that they had enough knowledge regarding AIDS.

Of particular concern, Robertson said, was the results on sexual behavior. Seventy-three percent of the respondents said they had engaged in vaginal, oral, or anal sex during the year preceding the survey, and 35.7 percent said they rarely or never discuss their partner's sexual health prior to intercourse.

A student wanting to fit in, wanting to experiment with sex, and drug and alcohol use, may feel uncomfortable voicing concerns about HIV in a setting where there's a lot of social pressure, Robertson said.

Social pressures also discourage student involvement in AIDS education. A student who gets involved with AIDS education runs the risk of being so-

cially stigmatized. It isn't "cool" to be part of an organization educating students about AIDS, Robertson said.

"Heterosexuals have been made to think HIV does not concern them," Frank said. "How AIDS spread in Africa should teach heterosexuals that AIDS is their problem too."

In fact, the spread of AIDS in the Western World is increasingly conforming to the pattern in Africa, where the disease spread first through the heterosexual community.

In the U.S. the spread is decreasing in the homosexual community and increasing among heterosexuals. Moffett attributes the decline in the gay community to awareness about the disease, and the gay community's efforts to educate itself on how to stop the spread of HIV.

"The spread of the disease is related to behavior, not sexual preference," Moffett said, "And behavior can only be changed through education."

"We're dealing with an invisible crisis," Moffett said. "Because of the disease's long incubation period, people think there is no crisis because they don't see it. But AIDS is still out there. People are still catching it. People are still spreading it. And people are still dying from it."

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