

Workshop emphasizes realities of AIDS

By Freya Horn
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

Students can find information about AIDS in health pamphlets, news articles and other media, but just knowing the cut-and-dry facts may not be enough to curb the spread of the disease.

That's why the "Not Just Another AIDS Workshop" last weekend sought to help students assess their personal attitudes, values and behaviors.

Students attending the workshop said the psychosocial approach of the two-day workshop is what it takes to translate knowledge into a change in behavior.

"It had a real impact on me," said Beverly Camat, a junior in general science. "I'm sure we hear about AIDS almost every day, but it just doesn't register."

At times, the workshop gave the students a hard dose of reality to help drive home the message that their decisions about sex are a matter of life and death.

Dr. Robert McAllister, the HIV program manager for Oregon's State Health Division, presented some jolting statistics to the workshop's approximately 100 students.

An April 1993 study estimated that as many as 10,000 Oregonians are HIV positive, but many are unaware they carry the virus, McAllister said, because their flu-like symptoms go away after a couple of days.

"Their immune systems are fighting (the virus) tooth and nail," he said.

But after an average nine-year incubation period, the immune system collapses. This is when HIV becomes AIDS.

Only a small percentage of the total infected population has the full-blown disease, he said. So far, about 2,200 AIDS cases have

been diagnosed in Oregon.

Meanwhile, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that college students run a one-in-500 risk of infection and that about 20 percent of people with AIDS in the United States are between the ages of 20 and 29.

These statistics were given a human face when a guest speaker talked about his battle against the virus.

Kent, who wanted to keep his last name anonymous, was diagnosed with AIDS when a drop in his immunity level was coupled with a bronchial yeast infection. By definition, full-blown AIDS means an HIV-positive person has a T-cell count below 200 and has had at least one related sickness, he said. In the past, he has had symptoms such as severe night sweats, unrelenting headaches, chronic diarrhea and frequent fevers.

Kent also discussed the economic hardship he has faced. Fortunately, Oregon is one of the few states that has a high-risk health insurance pool, he said, but he still has to pay 20 percent of his \$1,000 monthly health bill. Despite these medical concerns, Kent did not look sick or emaciated.

"Do I look like I have AIDS? No, I don't. So protect yourself, because you really can't make judgment calls," he said.

During the early 1980s, many people in the gay community were in denial about the seriousness of AIDS, and now heterosexuals may be going through the same phase of denial, he said.

The latest trend in the disease's spread may indicate that denial is indeed a factor. For example, the rate of infection is growing fastest among heterosexual women, McAllister said.

The denial also seems to be prevalent among college students. A recent study found that 50 percent of 272 University of Wisconsin students said they did not practice safer sex because they "just knew" their partners were not infected.

A skit addressing this problem was performed by peer health advisers at the workshop. One of the characters talked about a co-worker who didn't practice safer sex because he dates only "respectable" women.

"A lot of people think they can choose a type of person who won't have HIV, but this is a myth," said Jensen Ling, the peer health adviser who wrote the script.

Some people ignore the seriousness of the risk even if they know a lot about the disease, Ling said, because they convince themselves it won't happen to them.

"But it can happen to anybody," he said.

While bringing these attitudes into the limelight, the skit also showed how it is possible to overcome the embarrassment that hinders communication about safer sex.

"It's basically the American attitude to not talk about sex," said Tony Hoy, also a peer health adviser in the performance. "Sure, it's an uncomfortable subject, but if you're going to have sex, you're going to have to talk about it."

Another aspect of the workshop attempted to show students that safer sex does not have to be cumbersome.

"Safety should make intimacy even better," said Sarah Chartz, a health educator with Planned Parenthood. She introduced a variety of condoms that sported

names such as The Tuxedo, The Rough Rider Stud, The Mamba and Kiss-of-Mint.

Some of these condoms come lubricated with spermicide, but some do not. Students at the workshop learned that a latex condom can be 98 percent effective in preventing transmission of HIV if it's lubricated with a spermicide, and it can be 99 percent effective if it's supplemented with spermicidal foam.

However, effectiveness can drop to 50 percent in real-life situations, according to a study conducted by Health Decisions, a private research organization.

Why? Because they are used improperly.

Chartz showed the students how to avoid the perils of condom use. However, she said the biggest pitfall is when condoms are used inconsistently, or not at all.

While the workshop was a forum for a multitude of AIDS-related issues, students seemed to leave with one message in particular.

"The bottom line is, you have to take responsibility for yourself," said Carol Bjork, a senior in psychology. "It doesn't really matter how much AIDS-awareness education people have if they don't actually change their behavior."

Advisers dramatize AIDS issues

By Freya Horn
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With World AIDS Day coming Dec. 1, four peer health advisers are gearing up for a day of guerrilla theater.

They will spring up out of nowhere, bringing AIDS awareness to unsuspecting audiences all around campus.

"We've been wanting to do this for a long time," said Annie Dochnahl, the University's peer health advising coordinator.

Now, for the first time ever, a group of peer advisers has made that desire a reality.

Although the peer health advising program has existed for eight years, "it takes bold, aggressive students" to tackle a difficult subject like AIDS, Dochnahl said.

Jensen Ling, a senior in chemistry, wrote the script as a way of promoting open communication about safer sex.

"It gets the message across without being pedantic," Dochnahl said.

The scenario opens with two people on their third date. Because it's still early in their relationship, they are hesitant when it comes to talking about safer sex. Meanwhile, two peer advisers play the part of their inner voices, so the audience knows what they are really thinking. "We're trying to show students it's OK to talk about safer sex and to say 'I care enough about you to let you know I'm concerned about where we're going,'" Ling said.

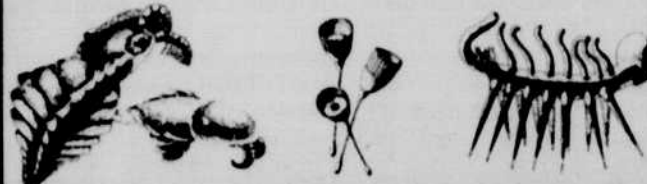
"Take responsibility for your life" is the bottom-line message of the skit, peer health adviser Tony Hoy said.

The roving troupe performed for its largest audience yet at the Nov. 20 "Not Just Another AIDS Workshop." Its next performance will be near the AIDS information table in the EMU on World AIDS Day.

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