

The state of Lesbian/Gay health in America

by Michael Helquist

The AIDS epidemic has brought lesbian/gay health care into the mainstream of American medicine, according to speakers at a recent national gay health conference, but with it has come escalating challenges to civil rights, health care delivery, and to the gay movement itself. And although AIDS dominates the concerns of the country's lesbian and gay population, other problems such as the high rate of substance abuse among gay people have emerged as critical issues.

"As a community we've never been more challenged by a single event," observed Caitlin Ryan, president of the National Lesbian/Gay Health Foundation (NLGHF).

More than 500 lesbian and gay health care providers gathered in Washington, D.C. March 13-16 to assess the health status of gay Americans. The three day conference was co-sponsored by NLGHF, George Washington University Medical Center, the National Institutes for Health, and the Centers for Disease Control. In addition to the American conference participants from 45 states, two dozen representatives from 10 countries presented the status of AIDS internationally. The Fourth National AIDS Forum coincided with this, the seventh, national health conference.

Keynote Address

Former Massachusetts state legislator Elaine Nobel, in her keynote address to the health conference, challenged gay people to "come out of hiding."

"We know that this is not a safe world for us, but we did not come into it for hiding," Nobel advised. "We will all be better if we take risks."

Nobel was the nation's first lesbian to acknowledge her sexual preference while seeking public office. She was elected twice to the state legislature. Nobel addressed another health crisis for gay people, one that has directly touched her life.

"I have struggled with and have now achieved control of my problem with alcoholism and drug abuse," Nobel revealed. She explained that her difficulties prompted her to help establish substance abuse service programs for other gay people. Nobel is now the president of the Pride Institute, a new inpatient care facility in Minneapolis, designed to treat the substance abuse problems of lesbians and gay men. Experts estimate that one-third of all gay people in the United States have problems with alcohol and drug abuse; in comparison the rate is one-tenth for the general population.



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Nobel and others at the conference emphasized that substance abuse weakens overall health and may act as a contributing factor in the development of AIDS conditions.

Blood Test Controversy

The announcement on the second day of the conference by the Centers for Disease Control that people in high risk groups should submit to regular blood tests to detect infection with the AIDS virus generated anger and anxiety among the participants. Representatives from several of the nation's AIDS organizations issued a statement opposing "any participation in a mass HTLV-III testing program."

The representatives asserted that the AIDS antibody test is not a diagnostic device and should not be used as one. They also argued that since no medical treatment is available for those who test positive, resources should not be diverted from basic education efforts and counseling programs already shown to be effective in changing behavior among high-risk populations. Supporters of the testing believe that individuals who test positive will feel highly motivated to change their behaviors, lower their risk, and refrain from spreading the virus. Conference participants countered that "there is no proven positive correlation between knowing antibody status and changing behavior."

A second statement from the conference dealt with another controversial issue, pornography and the portrayal of high risk sexual activities in erotic materials. Those who signed the statement said they recognized that "erotic media are an important means by which many people learn and reinforce the patterns of their sexual expression." As a result, the group encouraged "the erotica industry to join with us because we believe that together we can be more effective in the AIDS prevention effort." The statement expressed concern as well about the risks facing actors, actresses, and models who work in the sex industry.

Challenge from Minorities

"If you do not help, we will organize ourselves and go after our own money, and we will fight you if necessary," warned Manuel Fimbres from San Jose State University. Fimbres offered cooperation with the gay-identified AIDS organizations but indicated that there have been very few attempts to date to reach people of color with AIDS education and information. He concluded, "We may not win the battle for funds, but we will embarrass you."

Calu Lester of San Francisco's Shanti Project suggested that there exists "a conspiracy of silence" between the minority communities who fail to recognize the existence of drug abuse and homosexuality in their midst and the AIDS organizations who fail to develop effective outreach to the minorities.

"Each one of you in the audience can tell ten people every day for a month that 80% of the pediatric AIDS cases occur among black and brown children," Lester exhorted.

Gloria Rodriguez, a social worker for the state health department of New Jersey, voiced similar concerns. "Our communities are not being informed," she said. She explained that people of color fear that AIDS will keep them from joining mainstream American society.

Rodriguez, who is of Cuban descent, asserted that community-based AIDS groups, many of them gay-identified, must find new ways to reach ethnic people.

"Translating risk reduction brochures into Spanish is not enough," she noted. "That and nothing is the same thing."

Several staff members of AIDS organizations said privately that they were "about ready to give up" on minority outreach. They expressed frequent frustration in not being able to interest minority groups in their outreach plans. David Jolley, gay rights activist and AIDS worker from North Carolina, commented that the minority outreach issue could become "explosive" for AIDS organizations around the country.

International Concerns

Many of the 24 participants from foreign countries — representatives from Canada, Australia, and eight European nations — expressed disappointment and resentment that their concerns and ideas had received so little attention from the conference organizers.

Several received notices of the conference too late to submit proposals for making presentations. As a result, the representatives met as a group a day after the conference concluded, and only two American observers were present.

Several of the representatives said the incidence of AIDS in their countries was two to three years behind the rate of increase experienced in the United States. Yet AIDS is expected to become a major problem in each of the European nations. Iain Mackie, MD, who works with the AIDS Committee of London, Ontario, observed that Canada's current 500 AIDS cases is equivalent to 5000 cases in the United States when the differences in population is taken into account.

Few national governments have provided funding for AIDS education with the exception of Switzerland and Australia. Several participants said they found helpful the workshops on encouraging safe sex practices because very little had been done in their countries in this area. The international representatives toyed with the idea of forming an international AIDS organization, but they finally decided that the action was premature since so many countries had yet to form their own national organizations. They did decide that future AIDS conferences, whoever sponsors them, should include representatives from Asian and South American countries.

Community Service Awards

The board of directors of NLGHF acknowledged with special community service awards the efforts of AIDS researchers Mathilda Krim, MD and Paul Volberding, MD; AIDS lobbyists Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA), Gary McDonald, and Jeff Levi; lesbian health workers Charlotte Bunch, Patricia Robertson, MD, Lesley Anderson, MD, and Natalie Jane Woodman; film historian Vita Russo; Gay Men's Health Crisis (New York) founder Paul Popham; and the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth.

The conference ended on an emotional note during a final general session when two dozen people with AIDS and ARC joined Bobby Reynolds of San Francisco on stage for a healing meditation. Reynolds first announced the election of officers for the National People With AIDS/ARC organization, an idea generated more than two years ago. Then Reynolds began his guided meditation for the audience, an exercise that a few considered to be "very California" but most others welcomed as an opportunity to acknowledge the intense feelings experienced by gay people during the last few years. The exercise later prompted a Canadian participant to comment, "Until that event I hadn't realized the overwhelming grief experienced by so many of the Americans; now I understand better why the mood has been subdued here."

Conference organizers announced that the next annual meeting will be held in Los Angeles.

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