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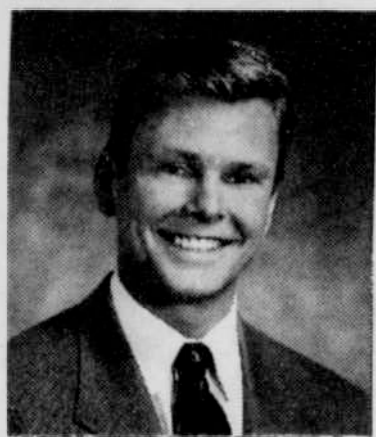
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national news

Survey points to lesbian health risks

New survey data have found that lesbians may be at higher risk than heterosexual women for breast, ovarian and uterine cancer, and for heart disease and stroke.

Nearly 900 women in three U.S. cities—Minneapolis/St. Paul, Chicago and New York—participated in the survey. While sexual orientation was the only intrinsic difference between the groups of women studied, the survey uncovered



several lifestyle and behavioral differences that researchers believe help explain the difference in health risks.

The poll found that lesbians tend to weigh more than heterosexual women, which, according to researcher Mary McCauley of the Howard Brown Health Center in Chicago, "increases the risk for breast and endometrial cancer because estrogen is manufactured from adipose tissue." Lesbian respondents did not necessarily have a less healthy diet than heterosexual respondents, however, they did report getting less exercise than their straight counterparts.

Lesbians may also be more likely to carry a genetic risk for some types of cancer, says McCauley. The results of the survey indicate that lesbians are significantly more likely to have a mother or sister with breast, ovarian or colon cancer, but it's possible that lesbians are simply more aware of family history of cancer, researchers say.

Twice as many lesbians as heterosexual women reported having a history of drug or alcohol problems, and heavy drinking was four times more likely to occur in the lesbian population than in the straight population. At the same time, lesbians are more likely to abstain from alcohol use altogether, which the surveyors say may suggest recovery from alcoholism.

Additionally, McCauley found that lesbians are less likely to obtain routine gynecological care, with only half the lesbian study participants—as compared to two-thirds of the heterosexual women—saying they receive an annual Pap smear.

ACLU sues on behalf of harassed student

The American Civil Liberties Union of Washington state filed suit July 23 in U.S. District Court on behalf of Mark Iversen, a gay youth who suffered ongoing harassment in school because of his perceived sexual orientation.

The suit charges that school officials refused to enforce Kent School District disciplinary and anti-harassment policies to protect Iversen from continuing verbal and physical abuse over a five-year period.

Incidents of harassment in the case include the October 1996 assault of Iversen by at least eight classmates who hit and kicked him while shouting anti-gay epithets; a teacher publicly questioning whether Iversen's perceived orientation would disqualify him from donating blood; and antagonistic and indifferent responses from school officials who witnessed other students abusing Iversen.

As a result of this prolonged harassment, Iversen says he suffered emotional distress, depression and stress-related headaches and stomach aches. On several occasions when he and his

family informed school officials of the abuse and requested protection, they were told he should expect such treatment if he acted or was perceived to be gay.

The suit seeks to force Kent School District to adopt and enforce policies that explicitly protect students from harassment based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation, and to require education for teachers and administrators on issues of sexual orientation and discrimination. The suit also seeks compensatory and punitive damages for the alleged violation of Iversen's rights to equal protection and due process.

Post-exposure treatment for HIV is hot topic

Scientists and health care experts gathered at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta in late July to debate whether the government should endorse the use of antiviral drugs as a morning-after treatment for people who have been exposed to HIV.

Opponents say the availability of such treatment could encourage reckless behavior, and maintain there is little proof that such treatment even works.

Furthermore, some are uncomfortable with the term "morning after" and its implications of simplicity, while the prescribed treatment regimen would in fact last a month. Failure to follow through with the treatment is another concern, in that it could result in the emergence of drug-resistant strains of the virus.

Those pushing for government endorsement of post-exposure treatment, meanwhile, cited a



1995 CDC study which showed that health care workers in the United States, Britain and France who took AZT after accidental exposure to tainted blood reduced their risk of contracting HIV by 79 percent.

Also, preliminary results from two unpublished studies of monkeys at the University of Washington and Tulane University show success when the animals are given a blast of drugs within hours after exposure to HIV. However, researchers stressed the studies are still in progress.

At the CDC meeting, members of ACT UP shouted at the audience to give up the idea of post-exposure treatment, which they say will divert funds from proven prevention efforts and safer-sex programs, as well as limit the availability of treatment for those who already have AIDS.

Bottoms comes out on top (for now) in visitation fight

A Virginia Court of Appeals panel on July 29 reversed a highly restrictive visitation order against Sharon Bottoms, whose son was removed from her custody four years ago because she is a lesbian.

The unanimous opinion written for the three-judge panel by Judge Richard Bray said, "While issues of adult sexuality and related behavior are significant to an adjudication of visitation, such factors must be assessed by the court together with other relevant circumstances and balanced in a visitation arrangement which both benefits and protects the child."