

GOING HOLISTIC

New program for gay and bisexual men addresses myriad health concerns by Patrick Collins

While the end of June saw the demise of the HIV counseling and testing program at Cascade AIDS Project, the beginning of July brings the kickoff of a new program sponsored by the Multnomah County Health Department.

At this year's Portland pride celebration, the health department set up camp, immunized 130 people for hepatitis A, and distributed a hefty amount of literature on a wide array of sexual health issues.

According to the program's architects, it's only the beginning.

Aimed at gay and bi men, and other men who have sex with men, the program offers "a rainbow of sexual health services" and has the potential to revolutionize queer men's concept of the term *health*.

Rather than focusing solely on HIV, the program incorporates HIV issues into a broader framework of health issues: hepatitis A and B vaccinations, testing and treatment for a spectrum of sexually transmitted diseases, prevention education, and community referrals.

Although still lacking an official title, the program appears to rest on a foundation of solid planning and organizational efforts.

More than a year and a half in the making, the program will offer hepatitis vaccinations at the rate of \$20 per visit. (Hepatitis A requires two visits, while B requires three.) While at the clinic, clients will be offered a menu of services, including a comprehensive STD exam as well as HIV testing options.

"This is a brand new approach, part of an institutional shift in how we look at the health of the community," says Doug Moon, a community health advocate with Multnomah County Health Department's HIV prevention and outreach effort.

Recently, Moon says, he noticed a "consis-

tent prevalence" of hepatitis A spread through anal-oral contact, and that 65 to 70 percent of the cases were in gay or bi men.

"We did an ethnographic study a few months ago searching for a link," Moon says. "The major link turned out to be sex, rather than food or travel. To address this increase, we came up with a program that looks at the total picture rather than just chasing down one disease."

Moon says he has faith the fledgling program will succeed.

"Gay and bi men are a very sophisticated audience," he explains. "I think people have been overloaded with HIV and AIDS prevention messages, and they've been asking for something which addresses the bigger picture."

A holistic approach to sexual health for queer men at a local county health department?

"There's a new movement afoot to bring everything under the same roof because the illnesses are transmitted and prevented in a similar way," explains Dave Christensen, who has joined the county's team as a clinician, bringing with him 14 years of HIV and STD prevention experience.

Both Moon and Christensen are openly gay men.

"The Centers for Disease Control's recommendation around communicable sexual disease prevention is to integrate HIV and STD prevention and treatment," says Christensen. "We want to approach this in a holistic way because our program is not going to be about just



Allen Fortuna receives a vaccination from Dave Christensen at Multnomah County Health Department's pride booth

HIV, but all STDs as well as other sexual health education."

Christensen has no shortage of ideas for topics he'd like to see addressed when clients visit the clinic.

"I'd like to educate gay men about the risks for colo-rectal cancer and testicular cancer," he says. "There are also referrals to services people might need, ranging from domestic violence to needle exchange. My philosophy is to not clobber people over the head and tell them what they should and shouldn't do, but to meet them where they are, to give them the tools to be as safe as they can be within the risks they're comfortable taking."

While all STDs are not curable, Christensen points out that most of them are treatable.

"Plus, treatment and education can often reduce the risk of passing something on to a

partner," he says, adding, "It's a pretty aggressive approach, but I'm excited because it's where the CDC wants us to go, even though there aren't a lot of health departments willing to do it. We can always use more resources, but we've put together the funding and have people in management positions who support it."

One such supportive manager is Karen Lamica, who heads up the health department's STD clinical services and programs.

"In this program, we have the opportunity to serve gay and bi men in new and improved ways," Lamica says. "We can be relevant to them, and we can make a difference."

Lamica says part of the driving force behind the new program is budgetary concerns. After 1997's Ballot Measure 50, she says, the county lost 30 percent of its clinical staff. That, combined with a steady reduction in federal funding in the HIV arena, has required organizations serving at-risk populations to come up with new and innovative ways to approach age-old problems.

Lamica seems undaunted by the potential for political fallout from so openly confronting the health concerns of queer men. She proudly cites the example of the county funding CAP's bathhouse outreach program.

"I don't know of too many governmental agencies that go to the bathhouse," she says, adding that she sees this program as yet another step in a continual process.

"We've been trying new and creative collaborations with communities all along," Lamica says. "This is not new, nor is it the final step. These programs grow out of our willingness to invite gay and bi men in, to welcome them to the table, to entertain their questions. Each step is small, but it represents us continuing to reach out."


■ Hepatitis A and B immunizations and STD prevention education are available at the MULTNOMAH COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT on Wednesdays from 1 to 6 p.m. and on Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. The clinic is located in downtown Portland at 426 S.W. Stark St. on the sixth floor. To make an appointment, call (503) 248-3700.

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