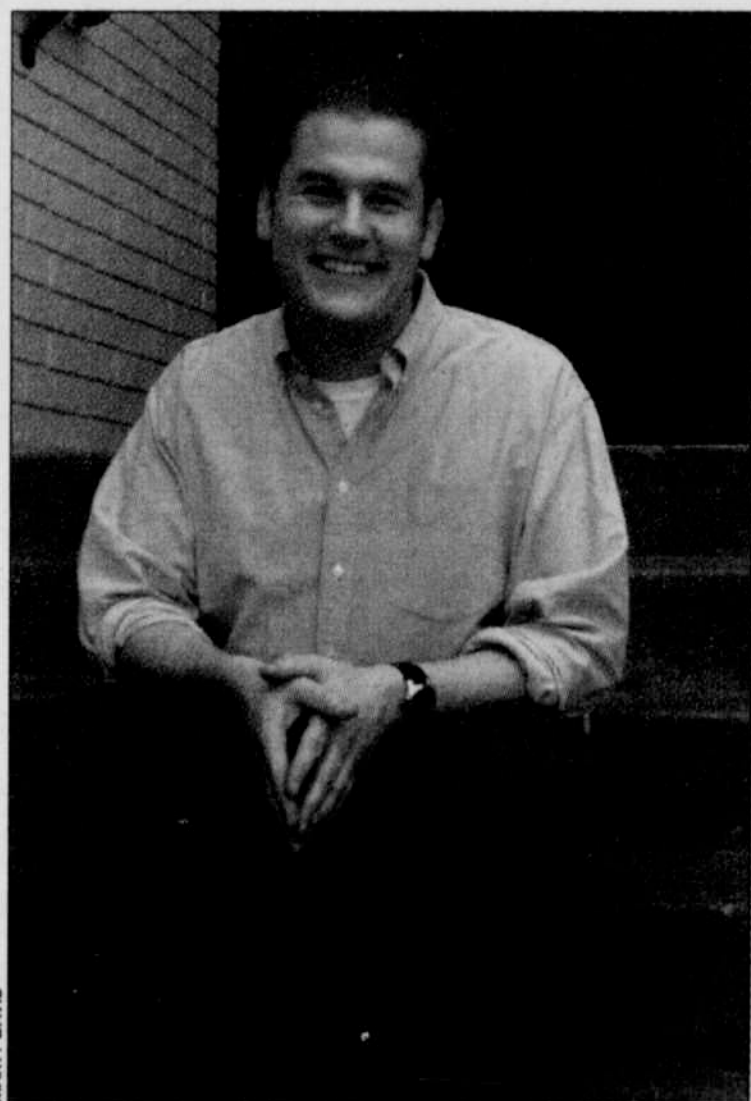


CLINIC SPECIALIZES IN STD TREATMENT

Out gay doctor helps fight homophobia

by Kathy Belge

Gay, lesbian, bi and trans people face many barriers to health care. According to the Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer, lesbians are less likely to seek health care because of the discomfort of coming out to their doctors and fear of a homophobic reaction. Gay men are also stigmatized and often treated poorly by the medical community because they are falsely believed to have AIDS. This homophobia expresses itself in a range of behaviors, from simple rudeness to overt rejection or serious neglect.



Don Valerio works to serve the sexual minorities community from his practice in Southwest Portland

That's why it is so important for queer patients to have doctors they can trust. Don Valerio of Fanno Creek Clinic in Southwest Portland hopes to meet this need in the queer community as an openly gay doctor.

"People feel more comfortable with an out gay doctor," he says. "They are more comfortable coming out and talking about the particular issues of being gay and lesbian." And that, in turn, leads to better health care.

Valerio is part of a team of internists at Fanno Creek Clinic who are general practitioners. He was working in New York City when he first visited his sister in Portland in June 2000. This trip coincided with the Portland Pride celebration, and he fell in love with Oregon's mountains, laid-back lifestyle and easy access to his passions of outdoor activities and hiking. He made the decision to move to Portland and, within three months, was unpacking his bags and setting up shop at Fanno Creek Clinic.

Valerio was attracted to Fanno Creek because, with only 10 physicians, it remains independent of any large medical group. The clinic's small size allows him to spend quality time with his patients. "You're a patient, not a number," he says. "Even if they are scheduled for

a 20-minute appointment, if it takes an hour, I'll take an hour." He adds that patients appreciate the extra attention they receive.

He also was excited about Fanno Creek's participation in clinical research studies on new medications. For example, the practice took part in a trial of Fuzeon, an injection HIV medication. The clinic now is participating in a study of HIV patients who have never taken HIV medication.

"It's unusual to do those studies for a group our size," he says. "Especially for HIV patients."

Although Fanno Creek Clinic always treated sexually transmitted diseases, Valerio decided to promote his clinic as specializing in STDs after attending a symposium about the increase in syphilis among HIV-positive Portland men. Many people know about Multnomah County's STD clinics, but some prefer to be tested and treated by their regular doctor.

"If a test comes back positive, we can treat it," Valerio says. "It's a continuity issue."

Growing up in Oneida, N.Y., Valerio always knew he wanted to be a doctor. "The only other thing I thought of was teaching," he says.

With the STD clinic, he finds he does a lot of educating of his patients. For example, he notes that barebacking is on the rise with HIV-positive men. "People don't know that you can get HIV again with a different strain of the disease," he says.

People can be walking around with an STD and not even know it, Valerio notes. "For example, a lot of women have gonorrhea and chlamydia and don't realize it," he says. That's why he encourages testing of all his sexually active patients—men and women.

He enjoys counseling patients one on one. For those who need more intensive counseling, Fanno Creek has

a clinical social worker on staff. That is especially important for someone with a new HIV or other STD diagnosis.

Valerio especially likes working with HIV patients because they are educated about their disease. Many spend time with Internet support groups to learn about different treatments. "With HIV, things are always changing," he says. Sometimes his patients even learn of things that he hasn't heard of yet. He then researches for them and lets them know if a particular treatment will work for them.

Valerio has also recently started volunteering at Outside In's Project Erase, a tattoo-removal program for youth who were formerly in gangs. (The waiting list numbers more than 300.) This work combines Valerio's interest in public health with his dedication to the Portland community, a community made healthier through his skill, care and commitment. 

FANNO CREEK CLINIC, 2400 S.W. Vermont St., takes most insurance plans and private pay clients. To make an appointment or for more information, call 503-452-0915.

KATHY BELGE is a Portland free-lance writer.

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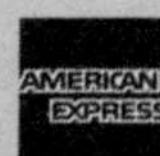
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