

Silence served to stigmatize a disease and those it infected. The tragedy is more than most can comprehend.

Revisionist history about Reagan must be rejected. Researchers, historians and AIDS experts who know the truth must never remain silent. Too many have died for that.

Revised from an article that first appeared in The San Francisco Chronicle. ALLEN WHITE is a San Francisco writer.

The Year in Disease: Rates of STDs Are on the Rise

by Jodi Helmer

Margaret Lentell urges men having sex with men to be screened for sexually transmitted diseases—even if they have no symptoms.

"Many STDs including syphilis, chlamydia, HIV, herpes and genital warts are often asymptomatic," says Lentell, health services administrator for the Multnomah County Health Department's STD Prevention and Treatment Program. "The longer you have a disease without knowing it, the more opportunity you have to spread it."

According to the Oregon Department of Human Services, cases of gonorrhea, syphilis and chlamydia are on the rise: Health officials witnessed a drop in gonorrhea cases from 1,145 in 2001 to 981 in 2003, but that number is expected to top 1,200 in 2004.

During the past three years, the number of syphilis infections has risen steadily from 22 cases in 2001 to 47 cases in 2002 to 74 cases in 2003—the highest number of reported cases in Oregon in more than a decade.

The rising rates are cause for concern among health officials who fear that more cases of STDs will lead to a far more pressing problem: "Our concern with the rise in [STDs] is that it is going to lead to another wave of HIV infections," says Doug Harger, STD program lead for the Oregon Department of Human Services. "We know that if we can prevent the spread of non-HIV STDs, we can reduce the transmission of HIV."

Harger and Lentell's agencies are working collaboratively with health and outreach organizations like Cascade AIDS Project and Q-LAND to encourage queer men to practice

safer sex and get regular screenings for STDs.

"There is a basic formula for stopping the spread of infection," says Lentell. "Have less sex, decrease the number of sexual partners, use condoms, and get regular STD screenings for early diagnosis and treatment."

Despite hard work to spread this message, STDs remain the most frequently reported communicable diseases in Oregon.

Don Valerio, an internist with Fanno Creek Clinic, says he has treated more cases of STDs this year than in any other. "Most of our patients are not surprised to find out they're infected," he says. "Either they have symptoms or their partner has symptoms or they have been having sex without protection."

Health officials believe an increase in risk-taking behaviors is a major reason STDs are on the rise: Nationwide studies report that condom use has declined from 63 percent to 23 percent during the past five years, and a 2003 study conducted by the Oregon Department of Human Services found that more than 45 percent of queer men admitted to having unprotected anal intercourse during their last sexual encounter.

Unsafe sex is not the only behavior that is worrisome: The rise in anonymous sex is a major cause for concern among health care providers.

"The only way to stop the spread of disease is to diagnose and treat those who are infected," says Lentell. "But if someone is diagnosed with an STD and has no idea who their past partners are, we cannot contact them for testing and treatment, which makes it almost impossible to keep the outbreak under control."

Harger believes the key to reducing the number of STD cases in Oregon involves three key steps: educating the community about the risks of contracting and spreading STDs; reviewing the issues with health care providers to ensure proper screening and treatment; and stepping up testing efforts.

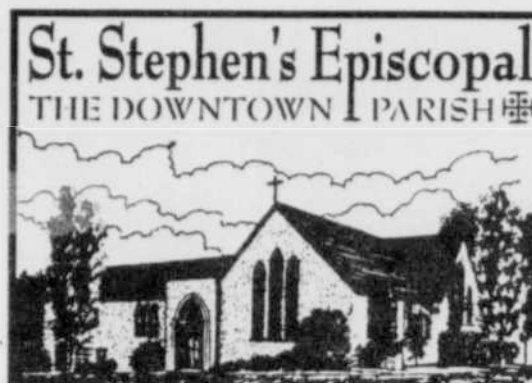
"We are finding that a lot of people are not being screened because they want alternatives to going to a hospital or a medical clinic," he says. "As a result, testing stations have been set up in alternative locations like Pride events, bathhouses and adult bookstores."

Continuing to reinforce the message that STDs have serious consequences is also important. "Any STD breaks down membranes and makes it easier to contract HIV," says Valerio.

Continued on Page 26



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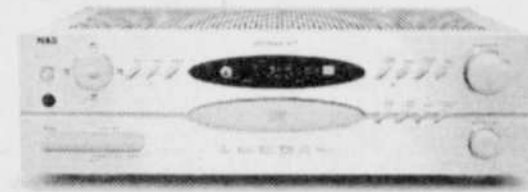
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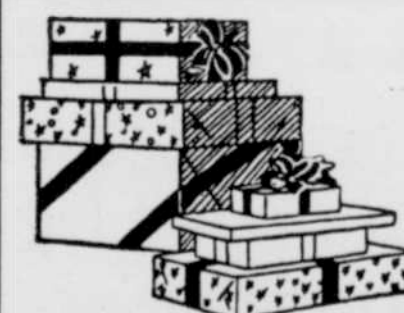
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