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left to right: Sheila Bennett, DMD; Adrienne Fischl, DMD; Diane Applegate, DDS; Clarice Johnston, DMD

NORTHWEST NEWS

The Boyfriend Study

... Or How an OSU Ph.D. Student Aims to Change the Way We Look at HIV Treatment

By RYAN J. PRADO

A recent study by the online journal *AIDS* reported that over 50 percent of HIV transmissions in the United States are contracted from the afflicted's main sexual partner. In the past, research for dyadic data—or information about a couple—has been relegated to culling information from only one partner in a relationship, limiting attempts to better understand couple dynamics and how partners influence one another in their sexual behaviors.

Now, Jason Mitchell, an Oregon State University Ph.D. student, has undertaken a study aimed at collecting data from both sexual partners to help detect how much influence one has on his partner given a particular behavior, and how men within the relationship differ or are similar.

The project is aptly titled "The Boyfriend Study."

Mitchell just finished his third year as a Public Health doctoral candidate at OSU.

"My advisors have been very supportive and forewarned me how much work dyadic research entails," explained Mitchell. "Let's just say, now I fully know."

Mitchell hopes to recruit 140 gay couples in the Pacific Northwest, mainly from Portland and Seattle, to take part in an anonymous electronic survey that asks a variety of questions on demographics, sex and some typical relationship factors, including commitment and trust. The study, which began in mid-June, is currently in the recruitment and data-collection stage. So far, 33 couples from Portland and Seattle have completed the questionnaire, but Mitchell notes that there has been reluctance from some men in the gay community to assist in the study.

"The number one challenge has been trying to coordinate everyone's busy lives or that the couple is going through a rough time," said Mitchell. "Putting that aside, some guys are just uncomfortable answering questions about their relationship, despite the fact it's completely anonymous."

Mitchell hopes to answer some important questions in terms of how best to fine-tune current and future health programs and campaigns that target gay men. Regardless of what the results indicate, local public health organizations in both cities will receive a report detailing the study's findings.

"I can't stress enough the importance of collecting information from a wide range

of couples to help better future gay men's health programs that explicitly target gay couples," said Mitchell.

There are myriad factors involved with why HIV infection has increased so drastically within recent years, notes Mitchell, including drug and alcohol use and abuse; depression; inconsistent condom use; infidelity; unknown HIV status for self or partner; optimism about AIDS/HIV treatments; using the Internet to find sex partners; complacency about HIV risk; and HIV and homosexuality-related stigmas, to name a few.

Portland and Seattle were chosen as the major foci of the study due to both cities boasting some of the highest rates of same-sex households per 1,000 households in the nation. This is the first study of its kind pertaining to gay couples in the Pacific Northwest.

"The direct catalyst for my research grew out of my passion to improve gay men's health, programs and quality of life," said Mitchell. "I've known many gay couples who have struggled with the typical relationship issues, but also in the context of expressing their own needs, desires, and values with their partners."

"When you combine these struggles with the lack of healthcare equity, general inequality for human rights and gay marriage, and constant struggle for positive and respectful visibility, it is no wonder gay couples face an uphill battle. What's most impressive is the amount of support that gay men give each other, the love they have for their relationships, and their ability to take ownership to create the type of life they ultimately want to live."

Mitchell is urging the gay community to get the word out about The Boyfriend Study.

"The LGBT community needs to continue to support one another," he said. "Now here's a chance to share your relationship information anonymously in an effort to help improve future health programs for gay couples."

Participants in The Boyfriend Study must be 18 or older, fluent in English, have been in a sexual relationship for three months or longer, and both partners must have negative or unknown HIV status.

To participate, email theboyfriendstudy@gmail.com, or call 310-663-3965 to schedule an appointment.



"The direct catalyst for my research grew out of my passion to improve gay men's health, programs and quality of life," says Jason Mitchell, an OSU public health doctoral candidate.

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