

1-1

Prevention:
A Gay Folk Medicine for AIDS

Interviews with Six Gay or Bisexual Men
About the Preventative Measures They Employ
To Avoid Contracting or Transmitting
Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

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Prologue

These are dangerous times
And if I take some chances
Put my heart on the line
What would you do to me
If I give myself up
To these circumstances
In these dangerous times,¹
Would you keep me safely

One Friday night, Philip and Brad took the subway uptown to Columbia, where the Gay Student Union was sponsoring a dance, and there they danced wildly, exuberantly, until sweat showed on their faces and their clothes smelled like tar. Afterwards, they ate cheeseburgers at an all-night diner on Broadway, and at six in the morning hiked the length of Manhattan to its very tip, marching through sleepy-eyed, hung-over Harlem, heedless of the dangers, until dawn found them at the fortlike Cloisters, triumphant as mountain climbers. Then they went separately home. As a matter of principle, as well as fear, they never slept with anyone, not even each other. They had never known that time when sex existed without the threat of disease yoked to it, and the fear of sickness was at the root of their consciousness - something of which they were seemingly unaware, and yet which ruled them, formed their attitudes and determined their behavior.²

The Interviewees
(All Names Pseudonymous)

RANDY: Gay white male; age, 32; occupation, florist; college-educated; currently practicing abstinence from sexual relationships; has not taken HTLV-III test.

"It's not our fault. It's not a gay disease."

JIM: Gay white male; age, 25; occupation, hairdresser; high-school graduate; currently practicing a monogamous sexual relationship; has taken HTLV-III test twice with negative results.

"AIDS is a disease that is inflamed only by ignorance in every social degree there is. It infuriates me for somebody to say that this was going to happen, a punishment from God, and there was nothing we could do. Society has become so perverse in their sexual habits, it had to happen. It infuriates me to see a prostitute, or a homosexual, or an IV drug abuser to go on national TV and say 'I've tested negative, I'm o.k., I can work, I can go on.' People can't continue to take chances."

WILL: Gay white male; age, 33; occupation, artist; college-educated; currently practicing sexual relationships with multiple partners; has not taken HTLV-III test.

"Use all safe sex precautions. Be careful about who you have sex with and what you do with them. If the person refuses to have safe sex, say 'Forget it.'"

MEL: Gay white male; age, 28; occupation, retail sales; college-educated; currently practicing abstinence from sexual relationships; has taken HTLV-III test once with negative results.

124
"AIDS is just a virus. It's not a defect or an indictment of the person who has it. It's not a punishment. It's a clinical thing, not a retribution. It's transmitted by sex, not caused by it. Sex is its way of infecting people. It's not a result of homosexual contact. It's a virus, nothing more. It's a virus induced condition, not sex induced. There is no judgment inherent in having the disease."

LANNY:

Bisexual white male; age, 23; occupation, accountant/student; college-educated; currently practicing sexual relationships with multiple partners; has taken HTLV-III test three times with negative results.

"I don't know anyone personally who has AIDS, but I don't think it will be long before I do."

"Homosexuals are notoriously promiscuous, but they are not accountable."

MICKY:

Gay white male; age, 27; occupation, student; college-educated; currently practicing sexual relationships with multiple partners; has taken HTLV-III test three times with negative results.

"Not just gay people get AIDS. We don't know where it started. Why should we have to take the rap? I'm gay. AIDS is a threat to me, but no more than it is to you."

Sixty-five percent (65%) of those individuals who contract Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS, are gay or bisexual men.³ Inasmuch as scientific medicine has yet to discover a cure for or a vaccine against this ailment, prevention remains the surest source of protection against contracting or communicating this disease. The preventative measures which gay and bisexual men can employ to protect themselves and others against infection with the AIDS virus can be divided into four areas of concern: sexual practices; drug practices; donation of blood, organs, sperm, or tissue; and education.⁴ The six in-depth interviews which follow were conducted in November, 1987 in Bowling Green, Kentucky. The interviewees, all gay or bisexual men, respond to questions about the prevention of a deadly disease from which they, as a discrete folk group, are at dangerous high risk and of which they have been labeled scapegoats, with candor and concern, humor and horror, and hope and despair.

SEXUAL PRACTICES

Since he is not employed in an occupation which would put him at high risk of exposure to AIDS, RANDY believes that "sexual activity is the only way I could come into contact with AIDS, since it isn't airborne." For the past 18 months, Randy has practiced abstinence from sexual relationships with others as "the only absolute method to keep from contracting or spreading AIDS." Randy describes

abstaining from sex as "the easiest method of prevention. There are no questions about safe or unsafe sex. I trust what I have been told about unsafe sex, but there are so many gray areas. I trust myself enough to know I can't draw lines. If I were involved in a relationship, it would be hard for me to say 'we can do this and we can't do that.'" Before choosing abstinence, Randy "drew no lines about safe or unsafe sexual practices." He often made resolutions to discontinue certain kinds of sexual behavior, but he did not follow those resolves: "It's real hard when it's staring you in the face," he said, pun intended.

Randy lightheartedly defines a sexual relationship as "anything that causes increased heartbeat." Under the category of 'safe sexual practices,' he includes "making out and cuddling, but no further" with sexual partners, including those partners who may have AIDS, those partners who may have tested HTLV-III positive, and those partners who may be carriers of AIDS. Under the category of 'questionably safe sexual practices,' he includes open-mouthed kissing ("It's a risk I would take. I'm not aware of any proven cases of contracting AIDS through the exchange of saliva.") and oral sex and anal intercourse accompanied by the use of a condom ("Condoms break, especially when teeth are involved! I'd rather not risk it."). Under the category of 'unsafe sexual practices,' he includes any sexual act involving the exchange between partners of blood, urine, semen, or feces. Randy resolves not to indulge in any unsafe sexual practices until

"the shot I get proves I'm safe from contracting AIDS."

While his abstinence outlaws sexual activity ("I'm not out there cruising.") with others, "if Mr. Right comes along I won't tell him to come back in 10 years." Randy does not believe that casual sex causes AIDS: "Because AIDS is spread by sexual contact, it (casual sex) increases your chances of contracting AIDS. Gay society doesn't stigmatize open relationships. It accepts casual sex because gay people have been forced to hide. When an occasion arose, they didn't want to miss out." Randy had decided not enough information is available in the area of how many exposures --one exposure or multiple exposures--are required for AIDS to be transmitted: "We don't know, but casual sex is still unsafe." He concludes: "There's a lot more to being gay than having sex."

While LANNY, a bisexual ("Why do you have to be gay or straight when you can be available?"), remains sexually active with multiple partners, both male and female, he avers: "AIDS has altered my lifestyle significantly." After attempting abstinence from sexual relationships with others for a period of time, Lanny concluded: "It's not fair to deprive yourself of sex. Sex is natural. You can't turn it on and off. If I could give up sex I would, but I can't." Lanny remains selective about his sexual partners: "I am very picky about partners and about what I will and will not do. I wouldn't have unsafe sex with anyone. I'm not a promiscuous person. I want a (one) lover." All of the long-term relationships in which Lanny has been involved have

been with women who were aware of his bisexuality: "I'm really picky about the women I go out with. I've never had a one-night stand with a woman."

Under the category of 'safe sexual practices,' Lanny includes kissing ("It would take 11 buckets of spit to catch anything!" I would kiss an AIDS patient on the mouth and have no questions about it!"), masturbation ("It's fun!"), and receiving oral sex ("I don't always insist on a condom."). Under the category of 'questionably safe sexual practices,' he lists passive anal intercourse, with or without a condom ("I've never enjoyed getting fucked up the ass!" Feigning a shocked response, "You want to put what where?"). Under the category of 'unsafe sexual practices,' he includes sexual acts such as "rimming and golden showers. Never, never exchange body fluids." Lanny considers condoms first and foremost on his list of preventative measures against contracting or transmitting AIDS: "Condoms prevent the exchange of body fluids. They are a turn-on, and they lend an aura of heterosexuality to homosexuality." Lanny attempts to "discriminate against potential partners whose histories are unknown or those who have reputations as sleep-arounds." Lanny hopes to establish a "safe sex relationship with one partner (so far with only limited results)," because "a monogamous relationship is desirable for reasons other than sexual ones." He advises: "Don't treat sex lightly. Find one person and stay with them."

Since learning of his negative test results to the HTLV-III exam in June of this year, MEL has chosen to practice abstinence from sexual relations with others:

"It's best not to jeopardize my status." Mel intends to continue abstaining from sexual relationships with others "until there's a cure, or a treatment, or it (AIDS) becomes a non-life-threatening situation." Mel believes that even in the least intimate sexual contact the danger of transmission of AIDS is inherent. He believes "deep kissing" to be a safe sexual practice, "unless there are breaks in the mouth, which can occur when we just eat, talk, or bite our tongues." He believes oral/genital contact and anal/genital contact to be safe, "as long as the condom is good and the lubricant is water based and doesn't disintegrate the condom." Mel considers any oral/genital contact or anal/genital contact without condoms entirely unsafe: "Without a condom, the person performing fellatio is taking a greater risk unless the person who is the subject has a sore or a tear. The passive partner in anal intercourse is in more danger than the active partner." Mel would never consider having sexual relations with someone who has AIDS, someone whom he suspected of having AIDS, or someone who has had sexual relations with multiple partners. Echoing the admonition of Nancy Reagan's anti-drug abuse campaign, Mel advises: "Just say no. Don't have sex. It's not worth it."

While WILL engages in sexual relationships with multiple partners ("but not as much as I used to"), he would question having sexual contact with "borderline" persons, such as

those who have "questionable medical histories" or those who currently have "numerous partners." He would also question having sexual relations with someone suspected of having AIDS: "If there's a question, it's best to say no." He would not consider having sexual relations with someone who has AIDS or with someone who has tested HTLV-III positive. ("I wouldn't have sex with Whoopi Goldberg, either," he joked, "I might catch her hair!") Will considers "deep kissing" and oral/genital contact and anal/genital contact with a condom as safe sexual practices, "as long as the condom doesn't break." Any oral/genital contact or anal/genital contact without a condom or any exchange of blood, semen, urine, or feces would be unsafe sexual contact; he adds: "If you don't get AIDS, God knows what you'd get!"

JIM has recently ended a two-year, monogamous (at least, on his part), same-sex relationship. He intends to abstain from sexual relations with others "until I have a good start on a good basic relationship - then safe sex only. The best way to be safe is to believe that no one is safe. I'm already in a high-risk group. I may have exposed myself (to AIDS). Why keep on doing it?" Jim asserts: "A condom is the best alternative for my lifestyle. I will never have sex without one." In addition to condoms, with any anal/genital sexual contact Jim insists on the use of Monoxodal-9, an over-the-counter spray foam spermicide, that "kills the AIDS virus. I heard about it on Nightline, and then I read magazine articles about it. There are condoms lubricated with it." Jim would not knowingly have sex with someone

who tested HTLV-III positive: "It's like walking out in front of a truck to see if the brakes work." He adds: "Any person you are suspicious about is unsafe."

Under the category of 'safe sexual practices,' Jim includes "fantasy, flirting, and visual stimulation, or masturbation in the presence of another." Jim considers oral/genital contact and anal/genital contact with a condom (and, in the later case, a spermicide) as safe sexual contact, also, unless the condom "tears or bursts." He considers "intimate kissing" an unsafe sexual practice, because "blood, not just saliva, can be exchanged." Jim believes that any exchange of blood, semen, urine, or feces between partners is an unsafe sexual practice. He concludes: "I wouldn't base a relationship on sex. I have in the past, but not anymore."

While MICKEY chooses to continue having sexual relationships with multiple partners, he describes himself as "pretty choosy. I don't go looking for it. When the time is right and the person is there. . . . If I meet someone I want to be with, somewhere in the course of the evening I ask, 'Have you been tested? Have you been checked?'" Mickey would not have sexual relations, "in any way," with someone who has AIDS or with someone who has tested HTLV-III positive: "I wouldn't take the chance." Mickey would not have sexual relations with someone suspected of having AIDS, unless "I got to know the person and found out it was all talk. Then I might." Mickey believes it would be unsafe to have sexual

relations with someone who has had multiple partners:

"You can tell if someone's pretty promiscuous. You learn people."

Under the category of 'safe sexual practice,' Mickey includes masturbation and mutual masturbation: "It's absolutely safe, fun, exciting, and private - sometimes." Under the category of 'questionably safe sexual practice,' he includes deep kissing ("I don't know if it's safe, but I do it.") and oral/genital contact and anal/genital contact with a condom ("You're taking a chance. I worry about it when it's happening and when it's over, but I don't dwell on it."). Under the category of 'unsafe sexual practice,' he includes "any exchange of body fluids."

DRUG PRACTICES

RANDY has never used illegal intravenous drugs, and he "never will." He would never "knowingly have sex with someone who uses IV drugs." Randy has used inhalant nitrates in the past, but he would not use them now: "I don't know if they're harmful in general, but I don't want to put more stress on my body when I'm dealing with a disease that can be brought on by stress." Randy smokes cigarettes, although he wishes to stop, but he has stopped smoking marijuana, in part, because of its possible debilitating effect on the body's immune system. ("I find myself craving a joint a lot more than I crave sex.") Randy believes that abstaining from tobacco, alcohol, and other recreational

drugs is valuable only to someone who has not yet been exposed to AIDS or to someone in whom the virus is inactive: "If the virus is there, I want to do as little as possible that could cause me to develop the disease. Stress weakens the body's immune system. A person can be exposed to AIDS, but what he does can bring it into action."

LANNY has never used illegal intravenous drugs, and he has no intention of doing so. He considers a sexual relationship with someone who uses illegal intravenous drugs as unsafe. Lanny does not use inhalant nitrates: "I hate poppers!" Inasmuch as he smokes cigarettes and marijuana and drinks alcoholic beverages, Lanny does not believe his consumption of such recreational drugs greatly increases his chances of contracting AIDS outside their effect on his general health: "The better shape you're in the more you can combat the AIDS virus."

MEL has never used illegal intravenous drugs: "I never have, and I never will." He would never have sexual relations with someone who uses illegal intravenous drugs. Mel believes the use of inhalant nitrates may "depress the immune system. Also, they're nasty! They stink, and they make you sick!"

WILL has never used illegal intravenous drugs, and he would use them only "if prescribed." He would never knowingly have sexual relations with someone who uses illegal intravenous drugs. Will has experimented with inhalant nitrates "to see what they were like," but he prefers to experience "massive coronary on my own." He would not use inhalant

nitrites again. Will doesn't smoke tobacco at all, doesn't drink alcoholic beverages very often, and doesn't use other recreational drugs, such as marijuana, either. Concerning the relationship between AIDS and the use of recreational drugs, Will remarks: "I'm not sure about other preventative measures. If you've got it (AIDS), you've got it. They (recreational drugs) won't make you catch it any quicker."

JIM does not use illegal intravenous drugs, and he would not have sexual relations with someone who does. He does not use inhalant nitrites; he believes they may be related to the development of AIDS. Jim smokes cigarettes, and he uses marijuana occasionally. He has "cut back" on his consumption of alcoholic beverages. He would use other drugs, such as prescription tranquilizers, but only "to cut back on stress." He adds: "Some drugs make you think differently. They could cause problems in deciding about the safety of a sex act."

"I'm a drug addict and an alcoholic," MICKEY confesses, "but I wouldn't use IV drugs, that's one ground I stand firm on." In principle, Mickey would not consider having sexual relations with someone who uses illegal intravenous drugs, especially a "low-type dopehead who shares needles;" he isn't sure about having sexual relations with the "professional" illegal intravenous drug user who practices "sterile technique: I can't say. If I start having feelings deeper than the physical, I'm not sure. If I did get involved, I'd try to persuade him to have a complete AIDS work-up, not just the test you get at the Health Department." Mickey has not

used inhalant nitrates within the last three months, although, he reveals, "I like poppers." Mickey believes inhalant nitrates may "inflamm the nasal tissue. It's an absorbent area susceptible to any kind of disease."

Mickey has used, or currently uses, the following drugs: tobacco and alcohol ("About all I do anymore."); marijuana; acid ("Not in a year or so."); cocaine ("I've been clean since June."); crack ("Never again, ever, period!"); and crank ("I couldn't turn it down if it was available."). Mickey believes that his use of recreational drugs may "break down my immune system, make me more susceptible to disease, including AIDS."

DONATION OF BLOOD, ORGANS, SPERM, OR TISSUE

In 1980, before he knew about AIDS, RANDY sold blood. Since learning about the disease, he hasn't sold or donated blood. If Randy's physical health were to require that he receive a blood transfusion, such as in a planned surgical procedure, he would prefer to stockpile his own blood beforehand.

Because of having contracted Hepatitis A as a child, LANNY has never donated blood: "No one will take my blood." If the question of the transmission of disease were set aside, Lanny would be willing to donate his organs in the event of his death. For reasons outside the domain of disease, Lanny is unwilling to donate sperm.

Until 1980, MEL, then a member of the United States Army, donated blood on a regular basis. He has now discontinued

1-16
that practice: "There's no way I can be sure, 100% positive." If the threat of the transmission of disease were not a factor, Mel would continue to donate blood as a "civic-minded thing to do." Because of the threat of the transmission of disease, Mel will not donate organs, sperm, or tissue.

WILL has never donated blood, and he "wouldn't now." Because of the possibility of transmitting AIDS, he would not donate organs, sperm, or tissue.

JIM has never donated blood, and, at this point, would not: "I would have doubts even if a cure (for AIDS) could be found." For the same reasoning, Jim would not donate organs, sperm, or tissue: "Gay people have a responsibility to people they don't know."

Up until two years ago, MICKEY donated blood on a regular basis. At present, he has discontinued that practice: "I can't handle the responsibility. I'm gay, and I'm a drug user." Mickey believes that if his health were to require major surgery, he would "stock up" with his own blood. Mickey would consider donating organs or tissue only in a "family emergency;" outside such a situation, he would decline organ or tissue donation for personal reasons outside the threat of the transmission of disease. Mickey would consider donating sperm under certain conditions: "If it were used to produce a human being, no. If it were used for experiments, for study, maybe. I couldn't be responsible for a child being born contaminated."

EDUCATION AS PREVENTION

Most of what RANDY knows about AIDS he has learned "through all media sources, everything I've read or heard." Randy attempts to educate others on a "one-to-one level. When I hear incorrect assumptions, I correct them." In addition to these small, daily crusades, Randy supports the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force with financial donations: "They're not doing research, but they're pushing to get things done."

MEL believes that the popular media have done "a miserable job reporting on AIDS. They show concern only when it's poised to stike heterosexuals." Most of what he knows about AIDS, Mel has learned from "reading gay publications and scientific journals." (Mel has high hopes that the publication of Randy Shilts' And the Band Played On will prove an informed reference work about AIDS for the general public.) Mel believes that the general public needs to be better educated about AIDS, and he would like to see the Ad Council produce television spots "telling exactly what kinds of sex to avoid and what the prognosis is." Once given the most informed information, "people in doubt can then refrain from sex and donating blood."

Most of what WILL knows about AIDS he has learned through "all the media, in general, from reading and watching television." He believes the media is "doing a pretty good job of keeping people informed." Will would like to see more

1-18

information about AIDS in the televised media: "People are more apt to watch TV than buy a book." He believes the public needs "more information on the how's, why's, and wherefore's about AIDS. They need to keep up on the research. We need to eradicate all the myths that have arisen about AIDS and stop blaming the gay community. We didn't start it." Will believes educating children in school about AIDS should be encouraged, "as long as it is done in the proper way, as long as it's not offensive to someone."

In his profession as a hairdresser, JIM, on a daily basis, deals mainly with women: "They're very naive, especially about condoms. Their partners feel like they (condoms) aren't necessary, and the women don't want to hurt the male ego." If necessary, Jim explains to his customers that he is homosexual; he explains what he knows about AIDS; he explains that the chances are "minimal" that they could contract AIDS from his services. "They're ignorant. They don't know anything. They think they can catch AIDS by breathing the air." He adds: "I've never lost a customer because they think they might get AIDS from me, but I have lost customers because I'm gay."

Just as his grandparents fear that a cure for cancer has been withheld from the public, because of the 'big business' of medicine, Jim wonders if the public has been told all that is known about AIDS: "You see policemen with plastic gloves, and you wonder. What has the government

not been telling us? Not enough money is being put towards AIDS research. Too much research is being done on drugs to prolong life, stop the symptoms, and not enough on finding causes."

MICKEY has learned about AIDS from "all sources of the media," from "school, work, medical journals," from the "respectable media and the educational media." ("I don't believe what I read in the rag sheets.") Mickey believes the public could profit from more information about AIDS in newspapers and on television, and he applauds the latest television efforts produced by the American Red Cross. He would like to see AIDS discussed frankly and openly "in every school" and "in every church, no matter what their beliefs are. We're all human. Someone may slip up." Mickey believes that if AIDS were openly discussed in every home, children and parents would reap the best benefit: "If I were growing up, a teenager, I would pay more attention if it (AIDS) came up openly from my parents."

Mickey always responds to the AIDS issue whenever the opportunity arises: "Just about every day you hear someone talking about AIDS. I jump at the chance to get in the conversation. If it's going bad, I may know more. It makes me feel good." Mickey concludes: "It (AIDS) will get a lot worse before it gets better. If we do what we can now, if it does get worse, it won't be as hard on us."

As their responses indicate, the preventative measures that the six interviewees employ to avoid contracting or transmitting AIDS have effected their lives in numerous and significant ways. In relation to sexual practices, two of the interviewees have chosen to abstain from sexual relationships with others entirely; the remaining four interviewees have become much more wary of individuals with whom they might engage in a sexual relationship. In relation to drug practices, all of the interviewees who use recreational drugs have become more concerned about the adverse effects of such drug usage on their general health; by implication, their concern with their overall well-being reflects a concern with their susceptibility to disease, especially their susceptibility to AIDS. While three of the six interviewees had never practiced donating blood, those three interviewees who did practice donating blood have discontinued doing so because of the fear of the transmission of disease. Finally, all of the interviewees encourage increased awareness about AIDS, on a personal level and on a public level. As members of a folk group at high risk of contracting AIDS, the responses of the interviewees concerning the preventative measures they employ to avoid contracting or transmitting AIDS reveal how pervasively that disease dominates their thoughts and actions.

NOTES

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²David Leavitt, The Lost Language of Cranes, (New York:
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³U.S. Public Health Service and the American Red Cross,
Latest Facts About AIDS, Gay and Bisexual Men and AIDS,
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⁴Commonwealth of Kentucky, Cabinet for Human Resources,
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