

Poker, Sour Grapes and Student Health:

The Hepatitis B Vaccine

Last January I met a handsome gay man who had just received a very negative report on the condition of his liver. He had had hepatitis, and the prognosis was not good. The meeting made me stop and think again about getting the vaccine, so I decided to go to Student Health to discuss the vaccine with a health professional.

I talked to a doctor who did not ask me anything about the frequency, starting point, or nature of my sexual experience, suggested that I have tests run to see if the vaccine was necessary, did not recommend that I receive the vaccine if the test indicated I was susceptible, did not know how much the tests or the vaccine would cost, and mentioned offhandedly that "some people in the health profession" were concerned about the possibility of contacting AIDS from the vaccine. I was told that we could spend all afternoon discussing that issue (and it was obvious that he was not going to make time for any kind of discussion) but that, if I wanted to know how much the tests cost, I should ask at the lab and that I could find out at the pharmacy about the cost of the vaccine. He gave me some pamphlets to read and said to come back later if I wanted to discuss the vaccine.

I went down to the lab, explained to the nurses that Dr. _____ had told me to ask about the cost of the tests and was told that the lab was not supposed to answer those questions. After repeating that I had only come at the doctor's suggestion, someone begrudgingly looked up the cost, which turned out to be \$35 or so.

The people at the pharmacy were, on the other hand, helpful; they told me the vaccine costs \$109, answered my other questions to the best of their ability, and gave me the waiver sheet to read. The vaccine is ordered at the beginning and middle of each month and takes a month to come. Because I had already read a lot about the vaccine, I decided to go ahead and order the vaccine without getting the tests.

"IT IS IMPORTANT TO VACCINATE PERSONS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AFTER THEIR HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY BEGINS"

-Centers for Disease Control

When I got home that afternoon I read through the pamphlets I had been given. Here's what I found in the article on the vaccine in the Centers for Disease Control Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (June 25, 1982):

1. "More than 10,000 patients are hospitalized with hepatitis B each year,

and an average of 250 die of fulminant disease.... Chronic active hepatitis develops in over 25% of carriers (100,000-200,000) [of the estimated pool of 400,000-800,000] infectious carriers in the U.S. currently), and often progresses to cirrhosis.... It is estimated that 4,000 people die from hepatitis B-related cirrhosis each year in this country, and that more than 800 die from hepatitis B-related liver cancer."

2. Hepatitis B virus is "highly prevalent in certain groups.... Homosexually active males and users of illicit injectable drugs are among the highest risk groups, acquiring infection soon (10-20% per year) after adopting these lifestyles."

3. "Screening in groups with the highest risk of HBV infection...will be cost effective unless testing costs are extremely high."

4. "Persons at substantial risk of HBV infection who are demonstrated or judged likely to be susceptible should be vaccinated. They include: ...Homosexually Active Males--Susceptible homosexually active males should be vaccinated regardless of their age or duration of their homosexual practices. It is important to vaccinate persons as soon as possible after their homosexual activity begins."

GOING TO STUDENT HEALTH...WAS A FRUSTRATING, CONTRADICTORY EXPERIENCE

Reading the Centers for Disease report made me very angry with the doctor I'd seen; besides #3, I wondered if he'd read what he had given me. Besides his callousness in dealing with a sensitive issue, I was also angry that he had brought up but did not have any substantiation for his fears about the possibility of contacting AIDS from the vaccine. All in all, going to Student Health for the vaccine (except for the pamphlets) was a frustrating, contradictory experience.

Doctors have bad days too, but that's a weak justification. Another friend of mine who is "homosexually active" went to Student Health, and his doctor recommended that he wait until someone comes out with a vaccine produced by genetic splicing, since it would also be cheaper. I suppose if you like to play poker with your life and your wallet, it's worth the wait.

If you have decided to do something about the tests or the vaccine through Student Health, here's the sequence:

1. Talk to a doctor (they can't all be as bad as mine) and see about getting the tests.

(See POKER, page 6)