

"Confidential" Testing Will Spread HIV Infection

Speech before the NC Health Services Commission, Asheville Hearing February 6, 1991

Ed. Note: There were many wonderful and moving things said by Ashevilleans at the Hearing. We could not print all of them. We wanted to share with you one which is an excellent example of human feeling and sound thinking.

by Art Polansky

I hope we're here tonight for the same reason: we all want to stop the spread of HIV. I trust the reason for this proposed change in testing and notification policy is driven by the success we had in reducing syphilis and gonorrhea through confidential testing and contact tracing. I wish this method would work for HIV, but I do not believe it will.

I am afraid that this State is about to take an action with a number of unintended consequences. I believe the elimination of anonymous testing is likely to increase the HIV infection rate--not decrease it. I also believe the elimination of anonymous testing will make the job of contact-notification more difficult--not less. I reach this paradoxical conclusion through a knowledge of the risk groups and the common perceptions about these groups and the disease.

Let's consider some scenarios through a bit of role-play. Assume I am a well-to-do gay man. Since I am reasonably well-educated and well-read, I probably already know about AIDS. I have been using rubbers for five years. I also have the means to go to Atlanta, etc., to get an HIV test. I haven't been the principal HIV vector for sometime. I probably won't be affected very much by the proposed elimination of anonymous HIV testing.

But, perhaps I am a poor, less-educated gay man. I don't have the money to go traipsing off to Atlanta. I barely have enough money for a couple of beers at the local bar. I don't spend my days reading newspapers and medical articles--I have to work hard for a living. I have heard about AIDS. I know I may be at risk. My main source of AIDS information is the rumor mills...and we all know the rumor mills are full of misinformation. I might still believe that the AIDS scare is some form of hype to get me to stop having sex. I have heard that "safe sex" is boring as hell. Nevertheless, I might get an "AIDS test" if I don't have to tell my boss I'm queer. After all, the rumor mill knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that AIDS is a gay disease--and I know my boss.

If anonymous testing is available, I may go in and take the test. If I get there, a skilled counsellor is going to clear up a number of misconceptions I have

about the disease. They will explain the modes of infection in a non-judgmental way. They will even help eliminate the misconception that the only way to prevent AIDS is to become celibate or bored silly. They will also make sure I understand my moral duty not to spread this infection. Regardless of the outcome of the test, I will be less likely to spread HIV. Were my results negative, I would know how to protect myself. Were I positive, I would be counseled to avoid unsafe practices and encouraged to get my lovers to in for testing. Then, treatment for HIV could begin.

If the test were not anonymous, wild horses couldn't get me to take it. After all, the rumor mill knows that AIDS is a death sentence and nothing can be gained by knowing you have it. Without counselling, it will be several more years before I lose that misconception.

Now, imagine I am an IV drug abuser. The tracks are written plainly on my arm. I am the most dangerous HIV vector at the current time. I cannot always find a clean needle, but I always need drugs. From my perspective, it is better to share a needle than miss a fix. The drugs have made me paranoid. I distrust authority. Authority wants to lock me in a cell. I am also mentally ill--I am adept at denial. If I can deny I'm an addict, I can certainly deny a little purple spot or a strange cough. Although the general public has a desperate need to have me alter my behavior, I might be too paranoid or too zoned-out to go to an anonymous test site. But you can bet your last fix I wouldn't go near a "confidential" or "reporting" site. I don't believe the claim of confidentiality.

Perhaps, in one of my lucid moments, I will realize my risk of infection. If I get to an anonymous test site before my cynicism rises again, I might take the test. When I get to the test site, the counsellors

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Over 100,000 US AIDS Deaths

The US death toll from AIDS went over the 100,000 mark in December, 1990. This represents over 60% of cases reported since June, 1981.

In January, 1991, nearly 9,000 new cases worldwide were reported to the World Health Organization.--*Durham Herald Sun, 2/3/91; Raleigh News and Observer, 2/2/91. Thanks to Bill Allen.*



"Yer Girlfriend," from Louisville, Ky., provided the music for the SALGA VALENTINE'S DANCE. Over 100 people attended the function at All Souls Episcopal Church in Biltmore Village.

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