

HIV/AIDS STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION: GAY MEN



The link in people's minds between homosexuality and AIDS is so firmly established that discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS is inseparable from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

GAY MEN & HIV/AIDS STIGMA

From the beginning of the epidemic, AIDS has been associated with male homosexuality because gay men were the first group affected by HIV in developed countries. The "gay plague", "gay cancer" or "Gay Related Immune Deficiency" were some of the terms associated with AIDS after the outbreak of the epidemic in the United States in the early eighties. Gay men were frequently singled out for abuse as they were seen as responsible for the AIDS epidemic. Sensationalist press reporting developed into an anti-gay campaign, and amplified homophobia and the scapegoating of gay men.

The factors that influence HIV/AIDS stigma in the specific context of gay men include:

- The sexual transmission of HIV amongst gay men;
- Pre-existing negative attitudes and beliefs towards men who have sex with men;
- The association of gay sex with behaviours regarded as "deviant". Gay men are often seen as "deserving" to be HIV positive.

Because of the pre-existing context of homophobia and the fact that gay men remain one of the main groups affected by the epidemic in the UK, stigmatisation and discrimination against gay men is still widespread.

MALE HOMOSEXUALITY, HIV INFECTION AND DISCRIMINATION

HIV/AIDS discrimination cannot be addressed without considering discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. HIV/AIDS is mistakenly associated with male homosexuality, and male homosexuality is mistakenly equated with HIV/AIDS. Men who have sex with men may experience a double discrimination: discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and discrimination on grounds of actual or perceived HIV status.

For example, a gay cinema projectionist was fired after his employer and work colleagues found out that he had been arrested for gross indecency in a public toilet. Fellow employees refused to work alongside the man because they mistakenly assumed he was HIV positive.

Knowing that a gay man is HIV-positive or that his partner is HIV-positive can also lead to discrimination. A recent example of this includes a gay man who told his employers he was HIV positive. Although they seemed very supportive, they told the employee when returning to work after his sick leave ended, that he should look for another job.

Discrimination also contributes to the increased vulnerability of gay men to HIV infection. HIV/AIDS stigma affects self-esteem, which may lead to risky sexual behaviours. Vulnerable, young gay men may even end up on the street where the risks of drug use, sexual abuse and HIV infection increase dramatically.

For gay men living with HIV/AIDS, this hostile environment has a negative impact on their physical and psychological health. Some hide their HIV status and experience stress and social isolation. Many of those who are open about their HIV status experience flagrant and explicit discrimination. For example, many health care workers, dentists and doctors refuse to provide care or avoid patients who are gay, and many gay men living with HIV/AIDS do not seek (or may not seek early enough) the treatment they need.

ORGANISATIONS:

Gay Men Fighting AIDS

Tel: 020 7738 6872

www.metromate.org.uk

Healthy Gay Living Centre

Tel: 020 7407 3550

Terrence Higgins Trust

Tel: 020 7831 0330

National Helpline: 020 7242 1010

Counselling: 020 7835 1495

www.tht.org.uk

UK Coalition of People Living with HIV & AIDS

Tel: 020 7564 2180

www.ukcoalition.org

Stonewall

Tel: 020 7881 9440

www.stonewall.org.uk

Healthy Gay Scotland

Tel: 0131 558 3713

www.healthygayscotland.com

The Lesbian and Gay Foundation

Tel: 0161 235 8035

www.lgfoundation.org.uk

Yorkshire Mesmac

Tel: 01904 620 400

www.mesmac.co.uk

ARE YOU HIV PREJUDICED?

For more information visit the campaign website at www.areasyouhivprejudiced.org

February 2003

Disclaimer: NAT has made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this fact sheet is accurate at the time of going to press. However, NAT cannot be held liable for any inaccuracies.