A Cell of One’s Own

December 1, 2000 By Jennifer Poteet

The day is hot, and the pathetic, ancient air conditioner in the clinic waiting room is not up to the task. I’m already frustrated when I arrive—prison will do that to you, and having HIV in prison will really do it. I hate going to HIV clinic, because it takes so much work: If you don’t know what questions to ask, and you don’t keep piping up and asking them, your visit with the doctor won’t give you the information you need. There are a dozen women right here in the waiting room with me, dealing with this same thing, yet I feel alone. The confidentiality codes of the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) regarding HIV are extensive. The prison administration says that having us all gather in one place—for, say, a support group—would put a strain on the policy regarding HIV confidentiality.

So here we sit in one room, silent in our confidentiality. Everyone knows why we are here: It is HIV clinic day. We take turns going through the same door. Dealing with the same doctor, dealing with the same fears. There are some women waiting for other doctors, but even they know what this door is for.

People have tried to have support groups in the past and it has not worked out, but I decide to find out why and try again. I make an appointment with a staff member to discuss my plan. When I meet with him he tells me there are several books written about HIV confidentiality and the regulations of the BOP. They were written in the ’80s, when it was much more dangerous to reveal your status in prison.

These policies have never been revised, and now they’re being used to keep HIVers in the closet. If HIV is treated with stigma in policy and by staff it will continue to be treated with stigma in the yard. Policy shouldn’t be able to prevent an individual from making the choice themselves about whether to tell people about their health.

I begin to explore how to change the policy so that we could have a group. After days of following staff around, talking to every single person who might be able to help me in any small way, I am told that the warden has given permission for me to start a support group. Of course, I am very excited about that. And of course, there’s a catch: The women will be told about the group at their HIV clinic and notified that if they attend the support group, the BOP can no longer guarantee their confidentiality.

Call me paranoid, but I feel the prison has some plan to make the support group fail. I believe I am about to find out why these groups have never succeeded in the past. The BOP figures I’ll fail, too,

and stop bothering them. Of course, they figure wrong.

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