Cell Culture

September 1, 2003

That November morning in 1997 was gray and windy, as if it already knew. At 6:30 a.m., I was taken from my cell at the state penitentiary in Angola, Louisiana, to a “call out” (appointment) at the prison infirmary, once a school on this centuries-old former plantation. The air conditioning fanned a hospital chill while I waited on a bench with 15 other guys. Loud talking and laughing are banned, so the mood was wintry, too.

A guard walked by and told me, “You’re here for Clinic C.” That’s the AIDS clinic, and I frantically stretched my memory, trying to recall my every sexual encounter.

From the windowless exam room, the “specialist”—a tall, elderly white man who used to be a veterinarian—told me I had HIV and sent me off to an isolation unit. I clutched a paper noting that my CD4 count was 340 and my viral load 15,000. A sign on the door of my new cell (I was locked down 23 hours a day) warned, “Contaminated inmate inside. Do not enter without proper precautions.” A few days later I was led to a meeting with two men from the state health department. “According to our records,” one intoned, “you are a well-known homosexual.” I acknowledged that I’d had sex with three people in the two years since I’d arrived at the prison. Those three were later told I was positive (they’re all still negative). One landed on the unit with me. During his hour out on the tier one day, he somehow got close enough to my cell bars to pour scalding water on me while I dozed.

During my three months in isolation, before I was moved back to the general population unit, I felt utterly alone. The nurse had no time to talk, and I didn’t know any other positive prisoners. One day I spotted my medical file, placed on a table by a prisoner who worked in the infirmary. It bore a bright yellow sticker reading “chronically ill inmate.” Within 24 hours guys were hollering, “You have that shit.” And boy, do I.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Cell-Culture-652-9672