Desperately Seeking Separatists

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Lesbians with HIV finally have a study of their own: With new funds from the feds, Kathleen Ethier of Yale University and her team launched in May an investigation into female-to-female HIV transmission. While only five such cases have been officially reported since 1984, none have been confirmed through genetic virus-matching, a technique employed by this trial.

“By doing this study we’re not saying that there’s a huge risk,” Ethier said. “But a significant portion of HIV positive women have sex with women, and yet female-to-female transmission is discounted.” Inspiration for Ethier’s study came from a startling 1995 CDC finding that 20 percent of women with HIV had or have same-sex contact.

Good women may be hard to find, however. One major obstacle to enrollment, said Amber Hollibaugh, former director of the Lesbian AIDS Project at GMHC, is that the lion’s share of lesbians with HIV have additional transmission risks related to IV drug use or sex with men. “Those risk factors exclude most women with HIV from transmission studies.” Such disqualifiers could be used to dismiss the likelihood of sexual transmission between women, said Hollibaugh: “The thinking is, ‘If you can’t recruit subjects, you can’t prove anything, so it’s not a big deal.’”

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