Hotline Help Me!

Fielding calls from the well worried, Emily Carter finds that years of HIV info is fleeting, while sexual shame is forever.

June 1, 2001 By Emily Carter

Few things are as shocking as coming face to face with one's own naiveté. Hailing from that tiny satellite whirling around in the farthest reaches of outer space known as Manhattan's Upper East Side -- but having lived in the Midwest for the past 12 years -- I am accustomed to tripping over my own ignorance. At 40, I would expect to have some grasp of how much I do not know, but I still sometimes forget how truly in the minority I am.

For example, I have long thought it was common knowledge that you can't get *it* from a toilet, but apparently I have been a very foolish girl. Asked by a Minnesota AIDS Project (MAP) survey if they thought HIV could be transmitted through coughing or sneezing, 52 percent of Minnesota's citizens could not say for sure; 44 percent were uncertain about the risk of sharing a drinking glass; and toilet seats presented a quandary to 43 percent. Before you coastal sophisticates start snickering, remember this is a survey from the heart of Middle America, and America has a very big middle. There are more of "them" than "us."

Now, I work at MAP, and part of my job is to answer the hotline. (Don't bother calling to give me a piece of your mind, however -- I don't answer to my name while working the phones.) Not only do people call with their underpants in a bunch about toilet seats, they panic about French kissing, finger-fucking, getting semen too close to their "mouth area" and, my favorite, urinating in a toilet in a stall where two gay men just had sex -- they watched, they don't know why, they just did -- and having the water splash back up into their urethra.

These mental peregrinations of the worried well may sound far-fetched, but they're nothing compared to the hard-core hypochondriac, like the gentleman who put his finger inside a transsexual prostitute's newly constructed vagina five years ago and can't stop calling me because how can he be 100 percent sure that he didn't have a paper cut? No number of negative HIV tests will relieve this guy's need to endlessly re-enact the scenario. Of course, it doesn't take a Freudian analysis to know that what he is expressing is shame at what he did -- a million culturally encoded misfirings of his synapses manifested as one humongous hangup. As a phone counselor, I can only hang up -- after gently suggesting that he seek that old Anne Landers standby, "professional counseling" -- and keep the line open for people who need, say, Meals on Wheels.

While MAP mostly gets calls from seekers of support groups, clinics or case management, it's the

paranoid ones that haunt me. They illustrate the intractable irrationality of humankind, aimed like a dagger at the hearts of PWAs. Think about it: No matter how we trumpet the advances of post-Enlightenment progress, many folks still pray to a vengeful and capricious god. This squat demon of superstition fills their sleeping ears with the old wages-of-sin-are-death whispers, starting schoolyard rumors about getting AIDS from leeches -- or Ryan White or Justin LiGreci (see "Catching Up With," *POZ*, May 2001).

And where does this lead? To the closet, of course, and to frantic, wriggling transactions in the dead of night. Sexy if you like that sort of thing, and many do. In fact, they are so aroused by their own filthiness that they forget to roll on a condom. Then they call their preacher, me at MAP or anyone else who will listen to their self-recrimination disguised as AIDS anxiety. I can treat the AIDSphobic individual with understanding. But in bed late at night, I'm assaulted by what I can only call multiplication anxiety: Take that one ignorant, terrified mind, times it by 1,000, by the days in the week, the states in the union, the number of nations on the planet affected by AIDS. In comparison, the brightly colored posters aimed at schoolchildren that we roll up and send out begin to seem like darts tossed at a hydrogen bomb. But dispatch the posters we do. And send out speakers, pester the legislature and all the rest. It's not enough, but it makes the day pass.

Meanwhile, in playgrounds across the great flyover, a kid is whispering, "You can get it from that girl -- her mother spends the night with someone she's not married to." And the phones keep ringing.

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