# Little Rocked

Arkansas doc fired for HIV

June 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

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In June 1998, *The Arkansas Times* named Thomas Jefferson, MD, “Pediatrician of the Year.” Two months later, he was fired from the Little Rock Children’s Clinic (LRCC) he co-founded in 1975 when his ex-wife allegedly leaked his HIV status. “I wasn’t surprised,” said Jefferson, 52, who was diagnosed with HIV in 1997 and has filed a federal discrimination suit against the clinic. “HIV positive pediatricians just don’t care for children in Arkansas.”

When Jefferson learned he had HIV, he notified the Arkansas medical board and began following the American Medical Association’s protocals to minimize transmission risk, said his lawyer, Chip Welch. And, according to Catherine Hanssens of New York’s Lambda Legal Defense Fund, there is no documentation of a surgeon or pediatrician giving HIV to a patient. But, said Welch, “LRCC wasn’t worried about children getting infected—they were worried about losing patients.” While the clinic admitted to learning Jefferson’s HIV status from “a source,” it denied firing him for that reason. So far, local parents have been largely supportive of Jefferson, said Welch.

Jefferson’s case, filed eight months after the Supreme Court granted PWAs protection under the Americans With Disability Act, could set a national precedent for HIV positive physicians.

“The clinic thought I’d be too ashamed to go public,” said Jefferson. “But I’ve always been a ‘shy guy.’ To roll over and die would be very bad for my self-esteem.”

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