Drug-Free Zone

To med or not to med? That is the question

March 1, 1998 By Shawn Decker

I was in the fifth grade, and it was “Just Say No!” Day. There was an old fellow warning us about the obvious evils of drug use: “It’s a crime,” “It will ruin your life,” etc. That day my best friend and I made a pact never to get involved in the world of experimental drugs. We even shook hands to seal our promise.

As it turned out, my negatoid buddy was not committed to the cause: In the decade since our pact, every drug known to humankind has probably taken an extended tour of his body. But me? I’m still holding true to that adolescent agreement made many years ago. Only these days, most of my friends see that as a big mistake.

I have never been on any HIV drug regimens. Having lived with this virus for more than 10 years, I feel that my body must be doing something right. While I’d like to claim that I am making a rational, informed decision, I must admit that part of my viewpoint on modern medicine has been shaped by my own dark and dastardly experience of it. I was born with hemophilia, and what happened when I turned to modern medicine to get me out of my jam? Hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV. Not that I’m bitter. I accept my fate, whatever it may be, quite readily. But to be pressured by the very ones who should understand my plight -- my fellow brothers and sisters of the Positoid Guard -- is too much.

The first time I went to an HIV support group, immediately after I informed them about my trials and tribulations as a long-term survivor, came the question: “So what medications are you on?”

I stared at my feet. My feet stared back. “I’m not currently on any positoid protocol,” I finally said.

“What?!” they shrieked. Suddenly I saw myself on my deathbed. For a moment, I felt like I was not in control of my life, the same way you feel when you’re first told that you’ve joined the ranks of the infected. But then I realized that I’m the only person who fully understands my pet virus. I think it’s quite evident that HIV is every positoid’s own personal viral adventure.

The truth of the matter is, I just can’t do the meds right now. Call me stubborn, because I am -- I fear change and I fear the unknown, and both fears are guaranteed to be a part of the equation if I sign up for a supply of hope capsules. But let’s say I do get hooked on the junk someday and my health (not necessarily my numbers) improves as a result. That would be great. I would go disco

dancing every night, and I would also have the energy for neighborhood pranks. On the other hand, what if my numbers improve, while my health stays the same? That would suck -- though I'd get lots of "Hurrahs!" at my group.

Above all, I want to keep my peace of mind -- even if that means chopping a few years off my lifespan. I know how I'm feeling now, and it would be a lie to say that I am the picture of perfect health. My main problem is a severe lack of energy, which is why three years ago I accepted Social Security Insurance at the precocious age of 19. What I like to say about my energy level is, I have enough to do the things in life that I want to do, but not enough to do the things that no one wants to do.

And it's true. I'm comfortable with my imperfections as they are, and I have a constant excuse to be "one with the couch," as a good friend puts it. What I am uncomfortable with is the notion of jumping into this bizarre world of experimental drug use. People in white jackets are combining meds in the same manner that children snap together Legos -- a random attempt at creating something beautiful.

I love the steps that have been made recently in the world of HIV meds. I have friends whose lives have been saved by the designer chemicals unavailable to them two years ago. I also have friends who are burnt out by the realization that no three- or 33-drug combo will prolong their lives.

For my own rescue from the madness of my reckless positoid lifestyle, I am going to honor that pact I made on "Just Say No!" Day way back when -- at least until this headline blazes across the nightly news: "Breakthrough Super-Pill to Cure Multiviral Wonderstuds!"

Then -- and only then -- will I become whacked out on drugs.

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