Internalized Homophobia Increases HIV Risk

September 19, 2008 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

According to a new study, the level of a gay or bisexual man?s internalized homophobia?not the fact of his being gay or bisexual?predicted his mental and sexual health.

?This study is a missing link in our understanding of the relationship between sexuality and health,? said Simon Rosser, Ph.D., a researcher in the University of Minnesota School of Public Health and principal investigator of this study, in a statement.

?It provides new evidence that negative attitudes towards homosexuality, not homosexuality itself, are associated with both poorer mental and sexual health outcomes seen in sexual minorities,? said Dr. Rosser. ?Conversely, positive attitudes towards homosexuality are associated with better mental and sexual health.?

?Providers should promote sexual health and avoid interventions that reinforce internalized homo-negativity,? states the abstract of the study published in the Journal of Homosexuality.

In the study, men with higher internalized homophobia were more likely to have clinical depression. Being clinically depressed often contributes to sexual behaviors that increase the risk of HIV. According to the statement, this research ?has also been shown to be effective in reducing unsafe sex.?

Anecdotal evidence for all of this stuff is plentiful?I can bear witness that it was true for me. Having dysthymia (chronic, mild depression) since childhood, I?m convinced that it was a contributing factor in my seroconversion. Dealing with my internalized homophobia sooner might have prevented it. I?ll obviously never know for sure, but it does seem to me more than likely.

Federal health officials and community leaders testified before Congress this week to urge action on our domestic HIV/AIDS epidemic. "If we don?t address the underpinnings of the problem, we?re never going to get where we need to be as a nation,? said Julie Gerberding, MD, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, during the hearing.

I hope that Dr. Gerberding and the many other influential government officials involved in this fight against HIV/AIDS understand that homophobia (internalized and otherwise) is one of those “underpinnings” that requires attention.

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