



AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN AND HIV ANTIBODY TESTING

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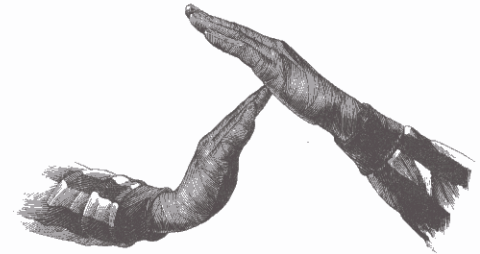
Black C.A.R.E. Project

In 1981 when a mysterious disease began to appear, later identified as a deadly viral infection, all eyes and resources focused on White gay men. They were young and they were dying long before their time. Newspapers, television and even the gay press bombarded us with the news of their tragedies as these young men succumbed to a new disease. Many African-American watched from the sidelines as the "gay white disease" progressed. For many, the watching was accompanied by a false sense of security that this disease was something that happened to "White boys" and if you didn't have sex with them you wouldn't catch it. But as the months passed with increasing numbers of White gay men infected, this perception of invincibility, too, vanished as friends, lovers and other African-Americans in poor community were increasingly affected by the disease. African-American gay men realized that they could get AIDS.

Yet, there did not seem to be

the same focus or concern for these men as seen in the White community. Research efforts were directed toward understanding AIDS among gay men, but African-American men were underrepresented participants in this research. So even in 1990 there are so many questions in the HIV disease spectrum where the experiences of African-American men are not well known. It is only recently that researchers are able to tell us something about how African-American gay men are responding to AIDS. One such question is the psychological effects of early detection of viral infection.

Getting tested is not a simple act. Rather it is something that can have at minimum legal, financial, medical and emotional consequences. While advocated for the sake of early medical treatment, for some, horrendous stories often played up in the media of suicides, evictions, loss of health insurance, abandonment by lovers and families make the decision a



very difficult one.

Yet we know very little about the decision-making of Black gay and bisexual men as a group regarding HIV antibody testing. We each know stories of those close to us, or of Black gay and bisexual men as a group regarding HIV antibody testing. We each know stories of those close to us, or of ourselves. For some of us, we know the experiences of many others that we may work with or counsel. But we do not know the broader picture of whether getting tested was a good or bad experience or why some African-American men have not gotten tested.

As part of an effort to document the experience of the diverse community of African-American gay and bisexual men and men who have had sex with other men but do not necessarily identify as being gay, Black C.A.R.E. has been conducting a national study of psychological response to the threat of AIDS. We have been collecting data from all segments of the African-American men's

community including those often overlooked: the incarcerated in prison, bisexually active heterosexuals and transpersons and crossdressers.

While we are still in the process of collecting that data, our aim here is to share some of the early results regarding HIV Antibody Testing. We currently have the results from our first 658 men ready for a preliminary look at their responses. Of this sample, 538 men (82%) self identified as gay. An additional 120 men (18%) reported that they were bisexual, heterosexual, or some other classification. In order to take a quick look at the results we classified the men as either gay or non-gay identified.

A first question was whether Black gay or non-gay identified men get tested. For both groups approximately 65% had been tested. Recognizing the possibility of a strong emotional response to testing, we asked the men whether they felt that knowing their test results have helped, hurt or had no effects on them. Looking back at their

testing experience, most of the men who had been tested reported that knowing their test results was something that helped them, though those men who were HIV infected and symptomatic, understandably, were more likely to be depressed than those who were not experiencing symptoms.

For those men who did not know their HIV antibody status, we asked them to rate several possible reasons why they had not been tested. Two Primary reasons given were that they felt they would not be able to handle knowing if they were HIV antibody positive and concerned about being discriminated against.

In a time when early detection of HIV infection is an important factor in early medical intervention to slow progress of the disease, it is important to know that many men avoid testing out of concerns about its emotional impact. We also cannot ignore those African-American men whose concerns over discrimination are very real and have served as barriers for their getting tested.

In the early years of the epidemic the White gay community advocated and received anonymous test sites. Many found out about their test status in situations with little risk of legal ramifications. However, for African-American gay men who want to know their HIV status now, the current public health emphasis is less on anonymous and more increasingly confidential testing.

While we fight for the necessary resources in our efforts toward behavior change and HIV risk reduction in African-American communities, we must not forget the importance of political interventions to help us in changing behaviors. Continued access to anonymous testing sites, as well as strong enforceable laws prohibiting discrimination for those with AIDS, HIV infection or thought to be HIV infected, is important in increasing the numbers of African-American gay and non-gay identified men who will get tested.

BLACK C.A.R.E. is still accepting questionnaires to meet our goal of hearing from 1,000 of you. Many of you received our lunar blue letters and questionnaires. If you haven't completed our questionnaire please do so as you can see your opinions can help other African-American men in our community.