



**Let's talk
about it!**

Planting a bug in your ear

by Phillip Banks

There was a bit of a stir in Vancouver's gay community recently following the screening of a controversial documentary from San Francisco about gift giving and bug chasing. Last August, the Vancouver Queer Film & Video Festival presented the documentary *The Gift* followed by a panel discussion addressing the intentional infection of a consenting partner (gift giving) and intentionally seeking HIV infection (bug chasing). The discussion was heated. Some folks were upset by the phenomenon as depicted in the film. Other folks wanted explanations for what they see as an increase in the practice of bareback sex in the gay community.

A big focus of people's anger seemed to be attempts made by some panelists to distinguish barebacking from gift giving and bug chasing. Many people saw this as an attempt to excuse people's irresponsible behaviour. Anyone picking up an *Xtra West* or other community papers in the weeks following the screening would have seen that the issue was not going to just go away. A kind of momentum seemed to build with more and

more people entering the discussion.

It's hard for people to understand why someone would want to get infected with HIV by intentionally seeking out an infected partner to have unprotected sex. In the film, one guy explained it as a way of making connections with other gay men and creating an identity in a community that felt cold and isolating. Another guy saw getting infected as a way of putting an end to the stress caused by feeling that it was going to happen eventually. So why not just get it over with?

Are these attitudes and perceptions due to HIV prevention going off the rails? Are they due to a failure of the gay community to provide support and guidance to our most vulnerable? Are HIV-positive guys to blame for infecting HIV-negative guys? Are negative guys to blame for not taking care of themselves? Who is responsible for these guys getting infected? Who is going to stop the madness?

I don't presume to have the answers to these questions. I want to say that talking about these questions is important and that by talking about them rather than

ignoring them we stand a chance of stemming the tide of new infections. But I think we have to do more than just talk.

We have to demand more resources for gay men's HIV prevention. We need to demand more resources for gay men's community health initiatives. We have to look beyond HIV to a future without HIV. We need to imagine that there will be a time when gay men and others will be able to grow up without the sense of the inevitability of HIV infection being hard wired into our brains. We need to take responsibility for ourselves and, if we want to call ourselves community, be responsible to others. We need to make better choices in the face of a terrible illness. We may need to make sacrifices. What do we want our gay communities to look like in twenty years?

Talking is a great place to start. But let's make sure we don't make talk look cheap. ⊕

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