

A twinkle in her father's eye

The joys—and challenges—of becoming an HIV-positive father

by Jason Wilcox

I've been a dad for seven years. For a new parent, a first child brings joy, fear, uncertainty, and raw emotion.

Disquieting questions rush in like a storm. Will my child be born HIV-positive? How will my family react? What damage might come from the antiretroviral therapies administered to my unborn child through her mother? Other parenting concerns become complicated: who will care for my child when I am gone? How will I protect my child from the stigma that plagues me as an HIV-positive person? At what age will I inform her of my HIV?

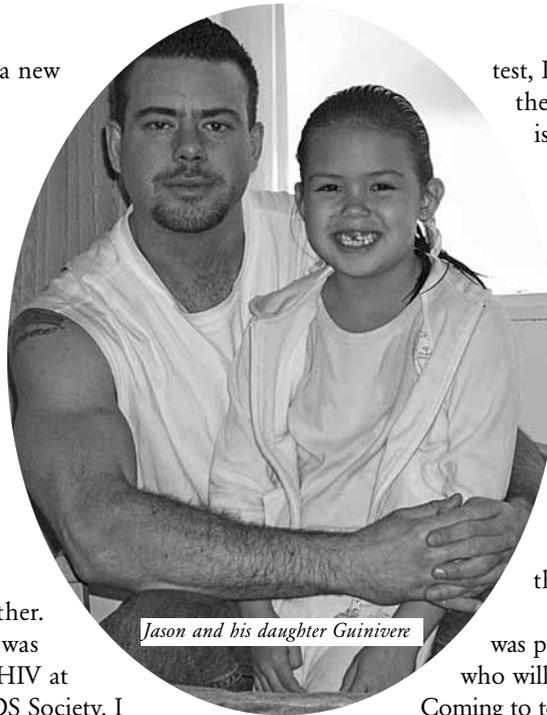
These questions heighten the challenges of becoming a nurturing father.

When I found out that my partner was pregnant, I researched pregnancy and HIV at the BCPWA Society and YouthCO AIDS Society. I investigated HIV parenting services such as the Smile Program (a parenting resource facility in Burnaby where I took prenatal classes) and the Hummingbird Kids Society. Grateful for and humbled by their assistance, which combined research and advice, I felt supported and sufficiently informed to plan and comprehend the complexities of pregnancy and HIV.

My daughter attended a now-standard series of doctor visits and blood tests. I frantically awaited results during each appointment.

My then-partner, also HIV-positive, delivered our daughter uneventfully by Caesarian section. Treatment included administration of nelfinavir (Viracept), 3TC (Epivir), and D4T (Zerit) throughout the pregnancy, followed by six weeks of AZT (Retrovir) treatment, post-partum, via oral injection.

My daughter attended a now-standard series of doctor visits and blood tests. I frantically awaited results during each appointment, and the fear I felt was ten times worse than it had been while waiting for my own results in 1994. In contrast to my one



Jason and his daughter Guinivere

test, I relived every test for 18 months until the doctors cleared her as HIV-negative. She is a normal, healthy, passionate, and polite six-year-old girl.

But the challenges aren't over. As an HIV-positive parent (and a single parent with full custody), I sometimes face hostility. I have faced stigma at pharmacies, government agencies, and blood clinics. Mostly, though, people are compassionate and understanding. This has helped me become a stronger parent and person. Oak Tree Clinic in Vancouver has been an important resource; while they primarily serve HIV-positive women and youth, they also help affected families.

Writing my living will was distressing. It was painful to plan for such contingencies as who will care for my daughter once I'm gone.

Coming to terms with possibly leaving my daughter prematurely launched me into temporary grief and sorrow. Writing a living will with a "do not resuscitate" clause—and deciding whether or not my daughter should be in the room when I pass away—brings ongoing distress. This is one of countless quandaries I face as I plan the best future for my daughter.

Children are greatly affected by their parents' HIV status. The epidemic is devastating millions of children and their families who are permanently altered by the intrusion of AIDS. Assisting children to articulate their knowledge, feelings, or reactions to HIV/AIDS without leading their responses requires delicacy and methods tailored to their individual needs.

Comprehensive programs for families living with HIV/AIDS would assist this. Such programs could help everyone to better understand the impact of HIV on children, their families, and their communities.

We need to work toward eliminating stigma and discrimination against HIV-positive parents. Those of us who are HIV-positive parents also need support to ensure we remain a family unit with our children as long as possible. But we also need reassurance that our children and caregivers will receive support if we're no longer able to care for our children. ☺

Jason Wilcox is a member of the BCPWA Society and a PWA peer advocate living in Victoria.