

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXI, Number 39, 30 October 1986 — Health advocates counsel students on AIDS concerns  
[ARTICLE]

## Health advocates counsel students on AIDS concerns

By KALI ZIVITZ

AIDS education got a head start at Columbia last year when volunteer "Gay Health Advocates" began informing the campus about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and dispelling myths about how it's transmitted, and how to avoid contracting it.

The group was formed a year ago this month with 12 members and now 19 people, including a psychologist, a registered nurse, graduate students, undergraduates, law students and administrators, work in shifts, answering calls and counseling concerned people.

According to the program's advisor, Laura Pinsky, who also works in the mental health division of Columbia Health Services, the group has counseled about 100 people since it began operation, with participation increasing every month.

Major goals of the group, according to advocate Paul Douglas, a graduate student in computer science, are letting people know that AIDS is not transmissible through casual contact, and informing people how to have "safe sex" to avoid becoming infected with it.

"There are strong psychological conflicts associated with AIDS," Douglas said. "People have fixed ideas and are resistant to facts because of deep underlying fears. This (fear) affects the way people absorb information of AIDS," he added, explaining why continuing education on the disease is important.

Advocates go through a training period, and then meet every other Tuesday to plan events, using alternate Tuesdays to discuss cases of training counselors and peer counseling techniques. The group also sponsors two or three forums a semester dealing



with the AIDS issue.

Questions fielded by the GHA counselors include inquiries about the transmissibility of AIDS from a mother to her unborn child and about the controversy over AIDS antibody testing.

A person exposed to the AIDS virus will develop antibodies to it and test positive even if he or she has not contracted the disease, and some people fear they may suffer discrimination on the basis of the test results even though they do have the disease.

Although the GHA focuses primarily on people who haven't contracted the disease but want more information about it, the advocates have dealt with three cases of AIDS.

People who actually contract AIDS would be more likely to seek help through a group like the Gay Men's Health Crisis, but Douglas said the GHA would provide counseling to infected persons if the need arises.

According to Douglas, GHA members initially thought the counseling would be sought mainly by gay men and by women who had sexual contact with gay or bisexual men. Eric Ryston, a psychiatrist at St. Luke's Hospital who works with the advocates, said that a surprising number of heterosexual women come in but that the group receives fewer inquiries than expected from gay men, most of whom already know about AIDS.

Health Services and the Columbia Gay and Lesbian Alliance provided several thousand dollars in funding for the GHA last year and will continue to fund its activities this year, but Pinsky said the group also plans to raise money through grants from foundations and through individual fundraising efforts.