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Group teaches safer sex to students

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In response to statistics showing that gay men and heterosexual women are, respectively, the first and second largest groups of people infected with HIV at Columbia, the Columbia Gay Health Advocacy Project (CGHAP) is sponsoring two new programs aimed at increasing student awareness about the prevention of HIV.

The first of these projects, Gay Men and Safer Sex, will concentrate on developing strategies to help gay men maintain long-term safer sex practices.

"Recent studies show that young gay men are having increased unsafe sex," said Laura Pinsky, director of CGHAP and a therapist at Columbia Counseling Services.

Wayne Steward, CC '97, and a CGHAP student employee, said that the way American society views gay men is part of the reason why HIV rates among gay men is so high.

"Gay people are under a lot of stress in this society," Steward said. "Sex is not easy to talk about, but its particularly difficult when a group of people have had their sexuality singled out as bad."

As a result, Steward said more than information is needed to prevent HIV rates from rising.

"A young man can have all the

HIV information in the world, but no real grounding in how to negotiate sex," Steward said. "Without grounding, he may not be able to negotiate the use of a condom."

The Women and AIDS project will target HIV education at women and look for solutions to the issues that prevent women from practicing safer sex.

Pinsky said women sometimes face extra pressure when confronted with the need to practice safer sex.

"[Women] want to practice safer sex and we feel that sometimes there has been a man pressuring them not to," Pinsky said.

CGHAP, which has worked at Columbia for about 10 years, will continue to sponsor the HIV Antibody Test Counseling program, as well as the OutReach hotline.

The HIV Antibody Test Counseling program, which is sponsored by CGHAP and University Health Services, is a confidential pre-test counseling service required of state universities. Students on the Morningside Heights campus, at Barnard, and at the medical school are eligible for the service.

During a 45-minute counseling session, a CGHAP counselor reviews the patient's sexual history

and assesses the potential risk for being infected with HIV.

“We try to analyze what a person’s risks are for HIV. We try to get a summary of what it is that brought you in to get tested. Why are you getting tested now?” Steward said.

Counselors are also trained to answer questions about HIV transmitted through intravenous drug use and through other sexually transmitted diseases.

“What we try to do is say ‘Here are the facts and ultimately you have to make the decision about what is safer sex,’” Steward said.

After the counseling session, blood is drawn by Health Services nurses and taken downtown to be tested by the New York City Department of Health. In about two weeks, patients are able to pick up the results.

Several hundred students use the HIV Antibody Test Counseling service every year, Steward said. The waiting period for a counseling

session and a test depend on the number of counselors CGHAP has available.

"All of our programs are greatly affected by the number of people involved," Steward said.

OutReach, a confidential telephone hotline for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students also operates according to how many volunteers are available.

"The purpose of OutReach is to provide a place where people can ask questions about sexuality," Steward said. "A person in the first stages of coming out is probably not going to want to walk into the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Coalition offices, or approach an openly gay person on college walk," Steward added.

Both Pinsky and Steward stressed the need for students to understand that anyone is susceptible to the HIV virus.

"Just because we are at illustrious Columbia University doesn't exempt us from HIV," Steward said.



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At the first SGA meeting of the year, members discussed plans to address federal and state cuts to financial aid.



ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR—KAREN DAVIS

Timea Szell, Barnard's new assistant dean of studies.