Lectures Promote AIDS Awareness

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by LAURA KAUFMAN

October is AIDS awareness month and in response, two lectures were held on October 8th and 15th to discuss the two most talked about aspects of AIDS: I.V. drug abuse and homosexuality.

The lecture focusing on I.V. drug abuse was given by Dr. Janet Mitchell, Director of Ambulatory Psychiatric Services at Beth Israel Hospital and Assistant Professor at Harvard Medical School.

The following lecture on homosexuality and AIDS was given by a panel made up of seven members of the Tufts community.

Mitchell discussed the facts about AIDS: the actual disease, its effects on minorities, and the I.V. drug abusers. The first point that Mitchell got across was that "the problem with AIDS is that you die from it; there is a 100 per cent mortality rate." Then, after dispelling myths that say one can get AIDS through kissing and casual contact Mitchell spent the majority of the lecture trying and succeeding in convincing the audience that minorities are more affected by the disease than anyone else, that "I.V. drug abusers never get over the press that they deserve," and that the United States is not effectively treating its victims.

Mitchell is well-informed on the subject of I.V. drug abuse and AIDS due to her residence at Harlem Hospital and her focus on work and study on pregnant addicted women and infant mortality.

"I've always taken care of the disenfranchised, poor, basically minority population," said Mitchell. She knows from statistics and personal experience in treating patients.

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that I.V. drug abuse is a bigger contributor to the spread of AIDS than is sexual activity.

Mitchell claimed 60 per cent of adult (over age 13) AIDS victims in the U.S. are white, 25 per cent are black, and 14 per cent are Hispanic. Upon first glance at these figures, one would think the whites in the U.S. are most highly affected by the disease. However, upon second thought, one realizes that a fourth of the AIDS victims are black but that blacks only make up 12 per cent of the population. Minorities are obviously hit harder by the disease than are whites. Nevertheless, 80 per cent of the children affected by AIDS are minorities. Mitchell predicted that in ten years, this figure will rise even higher. Infant mortality is twice that of white infant mortality wherever you look...you see it across the board.

As far as risk factors go, Mitchell claimed that 70 per cent of infected women list I.V. drug abuse as a risk factor and almost 60 per cent list children affected by the disease can be related to I.V. drug abuse. "It comes down to socio-economic status," said Mitchell. The I.V. drug abusers get the disease from sharing needles that have not been sterilized. It is a large portion of the minorities, as well as whites, who are taking part in this practice. Moreover, the minorities are generally poorer than the whites, cannot afford to get checked out before the disease hits, and cannot afford to get treated when they do.

Gay and Lesbian Community, and Danny Yu; faculty members Lee Edelman and Zela Lura, Dean of Students Bobby Knable, and mediator Saul Slapikoff. The panel included many different perspectives; gay, lesbian, minority, and straight.

A majority of the lecture was spent discussing the practice of safe sex to prevent spreading the AIDS virus. Luria expressed her concern over the fact that women are too timid to tell their partner to wear a condom. "It's exceptionally hard as female gender rules go for women to discuss sexual structure...This is a game of Russian Roulette...It's crazy but why is it happening?" Most panel members agreed that changing the aspects of gender rules for women takes something that most women have not grown up with.

Orcutt argued that too many people in today's society place the blame of AIDS solely on homosexuals when everyone who doesn't practice safe sex is actually at fault. "Everyone should be helping everyone to follow the rules of safe sex," he said. "Whenever I'm with my straight friends and the subject of AIDS comes up, everyone turns to me because I'm the gay man in the room...The chances of you getting it are just the same as me."

Slapikoff added, "It's a disease caused by a virus, not by sexual practice. It's spread by sexual practice."

Homophobia was another topic of discussion by the panel. Edelman explained that a great number of homophobia cases have resulted from the AIDS scare. Yu argued that "If the greatest things the gay community did was that it made sex positive...I see that sort of going down the drain now."

McDonald expressed her great fear of AIDS despite the fact that she is a lesbian, the lowest risk group for AIDS. "My only tie to the epidemic is that I could know people who are going to die and I have to deal with this...It's totally overwhelming how many people have already been affected."

"I think too many people have too much trust in the medical community and modern day science," Orcutt said. "There's a chance that [the spread of AIDS] will never come to a halt...Everyone can help stop the spread by changing their sexual behavior...we must start making this a reality for everyone."

The last topic of discussion was policies at Tufts concerning AIDS and AIDS victims. "In the next two years, an effort to educate people will be made," explained Knable. "We will be guided by the best medical evidence of what is safe...we will make those decisions by what is dictated by the person's health and health of others...We will operate according to a set of principles that are consistent, regardless of the situation."

A copy of these policies will be available for students within the next two weeks at Ballou Hall.