

Coordinated by Erin Goodman

## Women with AIDS



PHOTO: STEFAN JURGENS

Dr. Hillary Wass

by Erin Goodman

The public perception of AIDS as a gay disease hasn't changed, according to Vancouver doctor Hillary Wass.

But the risk of women contracting the disease is increasing, and she feels the burden of protection is falling on women in heterosexual relationships.

Wass, who gave a lecture on AIDS last Wednesday at the Dalhousie Student Union Building, is devoted to promoting AIDS awareness when she's not treating her patients afflicted with the disease.

Years ago, it was thought that women couldn't contract AIDS through sexual relations. But today, Wass says, "Heterosexual transmission is the rule in Africa and Haiti".

She hopes that widespread condom campaigns underway in Canada won't lure women into a false sense of security, in thinking that condoms automatically protect them from the disease. "Women have always known that condoms don't protect them absolutely from pregnancy," she says. And in the same way, she feels that women realize the threat of contracting AIDS even through protected sex.

She notes that condom ads are appearing in women's magazines but not men's, and points out that "once again, women are being asked to take the burden of responsibility, not only for contraception, but for protection from sexually transmitted diseases."

Wass finds that women are generally more aware they can catch the virus through heterosexual transmission than are heterosexual men. And she finds that as well as being better educated, women are also more tolerant of those afflicted with AIDS.

"The majority of people in AIDS (support) programs are either women or gay or both," she explains. "It's no accident that four out of five of the consultants in our AIDS care team are women." She sees homophobia among members of the medical profession as the biggest obstacle to better AIDS-patient care.

Wass says, "I think women have fewer problems with homophobia". She believes that in our society, women are stressed as being nurturers, and "tend to be less judgmental, less accusative".

With a growing number of women contracting AIDS, doctors are confronted with a new problem — the children AIDS patients give birth to.

"A woman who's infected with the virus and becomes pregnant runs a 50 to 60 per cent chance of infecting the children," says Wass. "And the child runs an even higher chance of having AIDS."

Pregnant women discovered to be carrying the virus are given the option of abortion (which Wass calls "the other 'A' word"), but often the offer is refused. The doctor believes that the decision to give birth to a child almost guaranteed to have AIDS is a reflection of the values of our society.

She will continue to battle ignorance, judgemental attitudes and homophobia within the medical profession, as the incidence of AIDS rises among both men and women.

## WOMEN IN THE NEWS

### SSAV loses funds

Halifax's Service for Sexual Assault Victims (SSAV) is losing its program for incest survivors in early January.

Incest counsellor Joan Bennets started work at the centre as part of a federally-funded Job Development Program. Funding for the program runs out on December 11th, and so far, no funding has come through to continue offering the counselling services.

Bennets is involved in individual counselling with incest survivors, and also coordinates self-help groups for adult survivors.

One in four women in Nova Scotia is a victim of incest. Before Bennets' work at SSAV, incest survivors depended on volunteer counsellors. With the loss of a full-time counsellor, women in need of incest counselling will have to be placed on a waiting list.

### Nigerian link

Dalhousie and Mount Saint Vincent universities are working with two Nigerian universities on a women's studies project designed to increase understanding of women's experiences in Nigeria.

The project, called the Canadian-Nigerian Linkage Program in Women's Studies, is a joint venture of Dalhousie's Centre for African Studies and the Mount's Institute for the Study of Women.

Initiated in response to concerns of the governments of Nigeria about the status of women in that country, the project will enable Dalhousie to offer graduate studies to Nigerian students.

### Morris shuffled

Premier John Buchanan announced a surprise cabinet shuffle Tuesday, which included shifting Edmund Morris, who has been social services minister since December 1981, to the advanced education department.

Morris was privately charged by Brenda Thompson for breaching the information act when he allegedly released information from her confidential file in May. Thompson, a 24-year-old Dartmouth citizen, is a member of the Mothers United for Metro Shelter. She is currently on social assistance.

Morris went to court yesterday, and if convicted will be liable to a maximum \$500 fine, 6 months in jail, or both.

## Mediawatch watchdog is changing channels

by Ian Johnston

Mediawatch, a national women's organization which monitors the portrayal of women in the media, is undergoing changes aimed at increasing membership and improving its lobbying efforts.

The organization, formed in 1981, attempts to eliminate sexism and pornography in the media and to raise the public's awareness of sex-role stereotyping in all its forms. Mediawatch activities include lobbying government heads and confronting forms of the media directly.

Eileen O'Connell, the national board member of Mediawatch for the Atlantic region, says the organization is launching a write-in campaign to increase its representation across Canada, and to partially finance the organization's activities.

O'Connell, a Halifax teacher, says having few members has hurt Mediawatch's credibility in the past. "The problem was, since our membership hadn't expanded, many of the complaints to TV stations or newspapers came from the same people," she says.

"They'd just get filed away.

'There's old so-and-so', they'd say."

O'Connell says a new system recently instituted allows individuals to bring their complaints about the media's portrayal of women directly to Mediawatch. If the complaint is judged to be valid, it is sent to the offending party under the Mediawatch name.

"Now, we're advocates for the complainant."

Another change will allow men to be associate members of Mediawatch. O'Connell says when the organization was formed, it was decided to make it an all-women organization.

She says it was a way of pushing women into positions of authority they might be reluctant to assume if men were present.

Mediawatch now meets regularly with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's office of the Portrayal of Women. O'Connell says Mediawatch has gone so far as to monitor some television programs before they are broadcast.

She says she doesn't totally agree with this form of censorship. She believes there is a danger in it, and says one of the major difficulties members of Mediawatch have is agreeing

on whether something is offensive or not.

O'Connell recently had an argument over whether a Tina Turner video was art or simply an advertisement for a song.

O'Connell says it is wrong to lump a video in with a 30-second car advertisement just because the motive is the same. "You could say the same about Oscar Wilde."

As an English teacher and a feminist, O'Connell has difficulty with the issue of censorship. But she says, "I guess if the majority of the public agrees it is offensive, there's your answer."