



Attitudes, myth, reality...

by Suzette C. Chan

While medical researchers race to find a cure for AIDS and the mainstream media keeps track of how quickly the disease is spreading into the "heterosexual community", many persons classified as belonging to "high-risk" groups and their friends live with an anxiety about contracting the disease or having a loved one develop AIDS.

Recently, a few role models for Persons with AIDS (PWAs) — like actor Stephen Stucker, who was diagnosed as having AIDS more than five years ago — have stepped forward but still it is the images of a gaunt, slightly delirious Rock Hudson that people remember, the isolation and physical and emotional suffering of many AIDS victims shown on television.

Michael Phair, co-ordinator of AIDS Network Edmonton, has counseled persons with AIDS, persons with positive AIDS anti-body tests and the "worried well." He says that

individuals who call for counselling have varying concerns.

"When dealing with the worried well, look at why it is they are worried. Are there reasons? Can they do something? Do they need medical services? Have they received misinformation? Sometimes," Phair says, "AIDS is at the surface and there are other things bothering a person."

For persons who have taken a test for AIDS anti-bodies, Phair says counselling is as important as important as for those who test positive.

"The advice is the same in either case. There are psychological difficulties in both. If your test is positive, it's difficult to handle what that means to your everyday living."

In either case, Phair recommends continued counselling but if friends of persons who may need or may be getting professional help can give them a boost just by continuing the friendship.

"Talk to them. Have them talk to you. Keep them busy in a positive

sense." Phair suggests going to movies, plays, hockey games, for walks and coffee, etc. "For the person, it will take time. Remind them that they are still human beings and that they are the same now as they were ten minutes ago."

Some people who have tested positive for the AIDS anti-body may react by first swearing off sexual activity for life.

Chastity if not realistic and probably not even healthy," says Phair. "You should be making decisions of what kind of sex you will be having."

Persons with AIDS or ARC (AIDS-related complex) may face more intense emotions.

"There is no cure for ARC and that alone is debilitating," says Phair. Other unanswered questions include: How is the AIDS virus spread? Does ARC inevitably develop into AIDS? What is the life expectancy of persons with AIDS or ARC?

"We can't say anything for sure," says Phair. "except that it's deadly,

there's no known cure — prevention is the closest we've got."

Phair says that while PWAs often go through a period of "mourning" and denial, some go into severe depression.

"We must encourage people to live as best they can."

The good news for people afraid of catching AIDS is that the disease is no longer spreading at the astronomical rate it had been in the past few years; the "safe sex" campaign seems to be working (Phair says the number of cases of gonorrhea amongst gay men has decreased markedly over the last two years).

Persons with AIDS or ARC may often feel like they live in an emotional rollercoaster, but as North America lives another year with AIDS, so do many PWAs, including those who become AIDS education organizers, spokespersons and positive symbols for all persons concerned about AIDS.

