

## SAVING FACE can't make you safe. TALK ABOUT HIV – for me, for you, for everyone.

### WHAT IS HIV-RELATED STIGMA?

HIV-related stigma refers to the severe individual, family and community shame or disgrace associated with HIV. People living with HIV are blamed for their condition and are punished—by exclusion, isolation, prejudice and discrimination—for contracting the disease. They are often vilified and reduced to stereotypes—drug users, gay men, sex workers—with little regard for their individual experience or situation. In the Asian & Pacific Islander (A&PI) community, HIV-related stigma is so powerful that people avoid talking about sex or HIV entirely. This silence feeds the fear and misconceptions about HIV transmission. For A&PIs, an HIV-positive test result can shame and disgrace the individual, as well as the family and community.

### Stigma in the field: DR. TRI DO'S STORY

A 27 year old Filipino male patient came into the emergency room, complaining about shortness of breath. This symptom was caused by lung fluid, but when we reviewed his x-ray, we found a suspicious lump. Tests showed he had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and his HIV antibody test—his first—was positive.

He couldn't afford insurance and had never seen a doctor about this problem before coming to the ER. In the past, he had seen doctors who were homophobic about his "unhealthy gay lifestyle." He was scared and avoided getting tested because he didn't want to find out he was HIV-positive.

He was admitted to the AIDS team at San Francisco General Hospital under my care for further studies and treatment. I assured him he was in a gay-friendly environment, but his fear and shame of being "found out"—of people discovering he was gay or HIV-positive—was so severe that he would not allow staff to tell his family about his sexuality or HIV status. We had to tell his family he had a normal pneumonia.

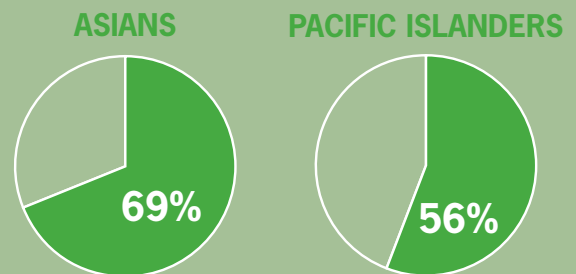
Eventually his breathing status improved and he could undergo cancer treatment. He became well enough to leave the hospital. I worry about him. Not being able to disclose important matters like this to his family will likely worsen his health. He doesn't have a support system in place to help him stay on his HIV medication schedule. He doesn't have anyone monitoring his status in case his condition worsens. And, we know that psychological stress hastens HIV progression.

### ALARMING INCREASES IN NEW HIV INFECTIONS

- ▲ New HIV infections **MORE THAN DOUBLED** for young A&PI men who have sex with men (MSM) between 2001 and 2006
- ▲ Annual percentage increase in new HIV infections for A&PI men and women was **HIGHER THAN ANY OTHER RACIAL AND ETHNIC GROUP** (14.3% for women and 8.1% for men of all ages, 2001-2004)

### LOW TESTING RATES

Since A&PIs and their providers perceive A&PIs at low risk for HIV, testing rates are extremely low.



Over two-thirds of Asians and over half of Pacific Islanders have **NEVER BEEN TESTED FOR HIV.**

### HOW DOES STIGMA CONTRIBUTE TO THE RISE IN HIV INFECTION RATES?

- **Health providers believe A&PIs are "low risk" for HIV infection.** They consider HIV testing for A&PIs unnecessary and do not offer HIV tests.
- **A&PIs are afraid to get tested for fear of rejection by family and community.** Getting tested might expose a secret, such as sexuality or drug use, both heavily stigmatized in the A&PI community.
- **A&PIs don't believe HIV is their issue.** HIV is seen as "someone else's problem."
- **HIV-related stigma increases HIV risk.** The intense fear and shame associated with HIV can lead to depression and isolation, often causing people to engage in unsafe behaviors such as unprotected sex or drug use.

## HOW DOES HIV-RELATED STIGMA AFFECT THE COMMUNITY?

HIV-related stigma permeates every level of society, from the individual and family to the community and health care providers.

### TAKESHI'S STORY

In June of 2004, I tested positive for the HIV virus. I informed my bosses, I remember how they took the news with surprising calmness. They simply said, "sorry to hear that," and continued about business as usual.

Several days later, however, my supervisor summoned me outside. He handed me an envelope with my paycheck inside and told me that they were letting me go. I began to wonder if the reason for my dismissal was due to the fact that I revealed I was HIV positive. Could it be that they were afraid I might be a liability to them?

**Employment:** Co-workers and employers can socially isolate people living with HIV/AIDS, and may even terminate employment when they learn someone is HIV-positive due to fear.

**Health Care Settings:** Doctors or health professionals may discourage HIV testing because they believe their patients are not at risk for HIV (such as A&PI women).

**Community:** Attitudes about HIV/AIDS can restrict where people living with HIV live, go to school, or get treatment. People may think they can get HIV by sharing eating utensils or by casual contact like kissing or hugging.

**Family:** Family members often provide support for those who are sick. However, families will sometimes reject or disown relatives who are living with HIV or seek to hide the truth about their HIV status.

### NAINA'S STORY

I knew that I had been in a few risky sexual situations, so I wanted to get an HIV test. I went to my doctor, but he told me as an Asian woman, I wasn't really at-risk. "Don't worry about it," he said.

I tried to get tested three different times. Finally, I got an HIV test in another country. I was HIV-positive.

### A CLIENT'S STORY

"The government should put everyone with HIV on an island and blow it up." These very words were said by a man I chose to date. At the time, he was not aware that I was HIV positive. When I was emotionally prepared to reveal my status to him, he reacted with shock and anger. I was accused of tricking him into liking me. My status suddenly became his personal epidemic: "I accidentally used your toothbrush and my gums were bloody. I kissed you after I brushed my teeth." After months of testing, he is not HIV-positive. The fact is, I know my status and I know how to practice safe sex. But I have no other solution of combating HIV stigma in the world of love.

### HENRY'S STORY

When I was diagnosed with HIV, my mother wanted me to come home so she could take care of me. At first, I was relieved, but I soon realized that "taking care of me" really meant she wanted to keep me hidden. She wanted to sweep me and the shame of my HIV status under the rug. I know so many people who tested positive and ended up leaving the Bay Area for other cities just so their friends and families won't find out they are living with HIV.

## WHAT CHALLENGES FACE THE A&PI COMMUNITY?

While we know a lot about HIV and A&PIs, there is a lot we don't know. Federal, state and local level data often do not accurately reflect how many A&PIs are living with HIV.

For instance, states with large A&PI populations, such as California and Hawai'i, are not included in current CDC HIV/AIDS data sets. Some localities do not disaggregate data, lumping A&PIs under "other." Without a reliable way of collecting A&PI demographic and testing data across the nation, it's impossible to know which communities and regions are most affected and most in need.

### A&PIs LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS

7,659 A&PIs have been diagnosed with AIDS through the end of 2005. This number may be unreliable, as it is estimated that 33% of AIDS cases among A&PIs are unreported.



**1 in 3 A&PIs living with HIV DON'T KNOW IT.**

- **A&PIs speak over 100 different languages and belong to 40 different ethnic groups**, yet HIV prevention information is available mostly in English and Spanish. This, coupled with a lack of culturally and linguistically competent health providers, makes it difficult to communicate HIV risk to many A&PIs.
- **1 in 3 A&PIs living with HIV don't know it.** Many A&PIs don't know they are at-risk. This is reinforced through family, community and health care provider attitudes.

**Stop HIV stigma in your community.**

**[www.banyantreeproject.org](http://www.banyantreeproject.org)**

**1-866-5BANYAN**



The  
**Banyan Tree Project**™  
*Rooted in Acceptance*

The Banyan Tree Project is a national campaign to end the silence and shame surrounding HIV/AIDS in A&PI communities.

The Banyan Tree Project is a program of Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center, San Francisco, CA and funded by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.