Fearless Compassion
Category : February 1999
Published by Anonymous on Feb. 01, 1999

MY TURN

Fearless Compassion

Dispelling HIV myths allows for loving care

Chandra Devi

My Guru Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati taught me to serve in the name of Shiva and that all people are Shiva's children. Ma's tireless, selfless devotion inspired my life's work, taking care of infected people with HIV and AIDS. Our commitment to her teaching that there are "no throw away people" has sent me and many of Ma's chelas into the streets of the USA to care for those forsaken by their families, their medical and religious communities. At Kashi Ashram, her River House home for AIDS patient's provides unparalleled compassionate care, excellent medical attention and spiritual guidance from Ma. It is a glorious model for putting into action the Divine truths taught by Lord Shiva and our spiritual teachers.

For six years I have worked as a Nurse Practitioner in a large infectious disease practice in Vero Beach, Florida, caring for those infected by HIV. I have seen the epidemic in all of its phases. Five years ago I helped people and their families cope with the devastating terminal aspects of AIDS and the final transition called death. Now we are in a new phase. Many who

are fortunate enough to receive appropriate medical care and medications can live. The focus now is on education. I implore everyone of you to get proper AIDS education. No one can escape being affected by this epidemic. Families and the medical community need to provide knowledgeable and compassionate care to all those infected.

There is irrefutable scientific evidence that the cause of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). HIV is spread by sexual (heterosexual or homosexual) contact with infected persons. Women are becoming infected at an alarming rate. The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta estimates that 41% of the adults living with HIV are women. HIV is also transmitted by blood to blood contact. This can occur by blood transfusions and sharing needles (frequently done by IV drug users). Babies born to an infected woman can contract HIV during pregnancy, at childbirth or through breastfed mother's milk.

Dispelling the myths of how HIV is and is not transmitted is critically important to prevent unnecessary fear. Fear can be psychologically damaging both to infected persons and their caretakers. Compassionate care cannot exist when fear is involved. Household transmission is extremely rare. Household members are virtually at no risk if they are taught simple measures to prevent exposure to blood, such as not sharing toothbrushes or razors, and wearing gloves when contacting body fluids. There have been no reported cases of transmission through hugging, social kissing or through contact with saliva, tears or sweat. The virus is very short lived outside the body, so environmental exposure is not a threat. Studies show no evidence that HIV can be transmitted through

insect bites, including mosquitoes.

Prevention of infection is truly our only way of keeping this epidemic at bay. In 1996 alone, 400,000 children under the age of 15 contracted HIV. Ninety percent of these children were infected during pregnancy, at childbirth or through breastfeeding. Mothers must be able to obtain the necessary nutrition, medications and education that can greatly lower the likelihood of mother-to-child transmission. The youth of the world are at great risk of contracting this disease unless intense educational programs are implemented. There is compelling evidence that, when used correctly and consistently, latex condoms are highly effective in preventing transmission. Failure rates are due to incorrect usage. It is a myth that the HIV virus can pass through the latex. Studies have shown that HIV education and sex education do not lead to earlier or increased sexual activity. Effective programs can actually lead to a delay in sexual activity, and lives can be saved.

Phyllis Kantor, 49, a nurse practioner and devotee of Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, lives at Kashi Ashram in Sebastian, Florida.