



The Non-Silent Treatment

For one doctor, the key to treating patients at an HIV / STD clinic is simple - talking with them

By Jacqueline Lalley

Andrew Petroll, M.D., is one of several clinicians who volunteer at the Brady East STD (BESTD) Clinic in Milwaukee. BESTD provides free testing for HIV as well as free testing and treatment of other sexually transmitted diseases.

Quest: What motivates you to work with patients at BESTD Clinic?

Petroll: When people have or think they might have an STD, they feel marginalized. Getting diagnosed and treated is probably one of the worst things that they ever have to do—they'll come from 60 miles away, just so they won't have to see their own doctor or someone else they know. So I guess I find it satisfying to take a traumatic experience and make it as easy as possible for someone by creating an accepting, relaxed environment.

Quest: How do you do that?

Petroll: You have to be open-minded and laid back so they can tell you everything you need to

know to help them, but you have to dig for information if they don't. And you also have to put some education in there, too, so they don't have to come back.

I'm often asked, "Why are people still getting HIV? It's 2005 - doesn't everybody know about it already?" Well, people get HIV and STDs because they're human. Having sex is not a rational, preplanned act all the time. You can either just say, "People shouldn't have unprotected sex," or you can understand that people do, and find a way to help them stay healthy and prevent it from happening again.

Quest: How do you educate people when they come in for diagnosis or treatment?

Petroll: I start by finding out, specifically, how they were exposed to the STD. If they tell me they're not using condoms, I ask why. Is it because they don't like to? Because they forgot? Because they were drunk? Based on that, I make sure they know the consequences of what they're doing. If someone comes in with gonorrhea, which can be treated immediately and cured, I make sure they know they could get something incurable next time, like HIV or herpes. Then I work with them to make specific changes. If they don't like the feeling of condoms, I'll suggest they put lube inside the condom, or try the different sizes of condoms. If they were drunk or high, I'll talk with them about that.

Quest: Do people make those behavioral changes?

Petroll: I can't always tell. Sometimes I feel I've connected with someone, but you really can't tell what they're going to do with the information. You can't even be sure they'll take their medication. The drugs for chlamydia, for instance—there's a twice-a-day drug that you have to take for ten days, which we always have because it's basically free. But there's a different drug that only requires one pill, so the patient can take it at the clinic and you know they're cured. But it costs \$40 to \$50 per dose, so we don't always have it. Not being able to give them that is a detriment to public health, because it's likely they'll go untreated and infect somebody else. Young people, especially, have a hard time taking medication twice a day for ten days.

Quest: What are patients' attitudes when they come for diagnosis or treatment?

Petroll: There's a huge range of emotions. For some people, it takes two minutes to come out and tell you what's wrong. They'll be really ashamed or embarrassed. Other people will simply say, "I've got this spot," and just show you.

Quest: Is the clinic busy?

Petroll: Yes - we're working constantly. We start at 6 PM and are supposed to close at 8:30 - but I've been there as late as 10:30 when there was no other doctor. But people who had been waiting three hours showed no sign of being upset. They're so thankful to be in an environment that's open and understanding, and to get the service for free or for whatever money they feel like donating.

Quest: Who comes to BESTD?

Petroll: All kinds of people come for testing. As far as STD treatment, the clinic serves men - about equal numbers of African American and white men, and smaller numbers of Latino and other men. I'd say about half are men who have sex with men, and about half are heterosexual. They seem to be from all socioeconomic backgrounds - some are uninsured and / or not working, others have jobs and insurance but don't want to see their own doctor. Most are between 25 and 45, but I've seen people in their 70s.

Quest: Is the work stressful?

Petroll: Oh no, not really. Everyone who's working at BESTD wants to be there. No one's getting paid. People feel like they're doing something good, and the people who come in for testing and treatment are always appreciative.

Located at 1240 E. Brady Street, BESTD Clinic is open Mondays and Tuesdays, 6-8:30 PM. The clinic is staffed completely by volunteers and supported solely by donations.

Jacqueline Lalley is a writer whose work has appeared in The Onion, Bitch magazine, the Wisconsin State Journal, and other publications. Her essay "Evidence" was published in *Secrets and Confidences: The Complicated Truth about Women's Friendships* (2004, Seal Press / Avalon).

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