

## **You May Be HIV-Positive, Now What?**

La Columna Vertebral (The Support Column)

By Ellen Alderton

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has hit the U.S. Latino community particularly hard. As of 2001, almost 20,000 cases of HIV infection were reported among Latinos and, today, Latinos account for one-fifth of all HIV infections in the country. Twenty years ago, testing positive for HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) usually meant death within a short time period. Today, while finding out that you have HIV is still sobering news, HIV has become a treatable, manageable disease – albeit one which requires constant and expensive medical attention.

### **Anti-retroviral therapy**

Since its introduction in 1997, a new form of HIV treatment, known as Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART), has cut AIDS death rates in half. Anti-retroviral drugs work by slowing down the reproduction of the HIV virus. (As HIV grows in the body, it gradually weakens the immune system until, eventually, the infected person develops the disease, AIDS.)

While HAART treatment cannot completely prevent the growth of HIV, it can slow down HIV's advance significantly. The British-based National AIDS Trust, for example, reports that HAART treatment can extend an infected person's life by at least 10 to 15 years.

### **Protecting the unborn**

Anti-retroviral treatment may not only be important for you, it can also be crucial to the other people in your life. A pregnant HIV-infected mother, for example, can pass the infection along to her unborn child. In fact, slightly over three percent of the HIV cases in the Latino community are among children younger than 5 years of age. But, pregnant women do not always pass along the HIV infection to their fetuses, and there are steps an expecting mother can take to minimize the chances that she does. Proper medical treatment can reduce the baby's risk of catching the virus by almost 70 percent.

### **I'd rather not know**

When something is frightening, it's all too human to want to just turn the other way. When it comes to dealing with HIV/AIDS, choosing ignorance is the worst possible course of action. Speaking in 1993 about the lessons the Latino community had drawn from AIDS, activist Dana Gorbea-Leon, a Latina living with HIV, commented, "We learned that until we died we were very much alive, that until we died we could refuse to be a statistic or a number in someone else's charting of the epidemic, that until we died we had a responsibility to live the kind of lives we saw fit."

By not facing the fact that you may be HIV-infected, you run the risk of passing the infection along to those who matter most to you – a lover or an unborn child. By not

getting immediate treatment, you could also be cutting 10 to 15 years from your own life. Take heart, and if there is a chance that you could be infected (if you have ever had sex without using a latex condom or if you have used injection drugs), go and get yourself tested.

### **HIV/AIDS treatment centers**

True, many people in the Latino community do not have health insurance; others don't even have papers. Fortunately, there are many resources out there for people of limited means. Many community health clinics offer free AIDS testing, free counseling, and free or reduced-cost medicines to people in need – regardless of their citizenship status.

Call the National Hispanic Resource Help-Line today to find out if there any such treatment centers in your area: 800-473-3003. Calls are free and confidential.

(Thanks go to the Whitman-Walker Clinic and Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington; both organizations reviewed this column.)