

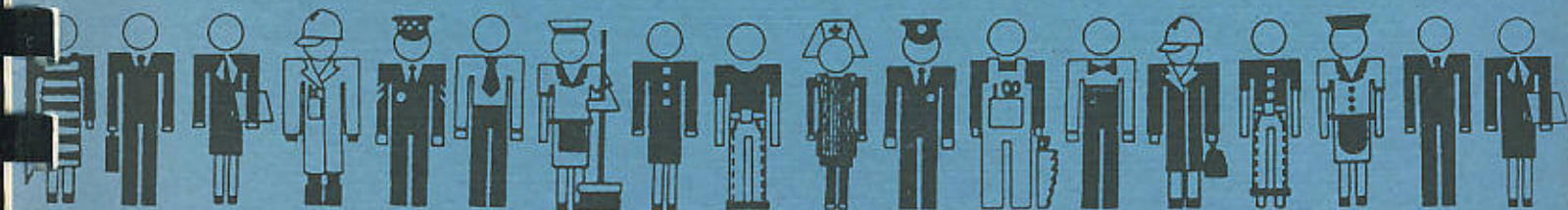
AIDS AND THE WORKFORCE SEMINAR :
PERSONNEL ISSUES RELATED TO AIDS VIRUS INFECTION

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A Seminar sponsored by the Albion Street Centre in association
with the Australian National Council on AIDS.

A SUMMARY

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PERSONNEL ISSUES: AN OVERVIEW

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PERSONNEL ISSUES : AN OVERVIEW

HIV and the Workplace

HIV effects the Australian workforce in four ways.

- 1) It is a public health problem about which the entire community should be educated. The workplace environment presents an excellent opportunity for public health education.
- 2) There are potential occupational risks in various work situations which may, theoretically, place workers at risk of being exposed to HIV.
- 3) AIDS combines people's fear about death, sex and homosexuality, and consequently many responses to the perceived threat of infection are over-reactions, which if not controlled can result in loss of productivity and low staff morale.
- 4) It can realistically be assumed that all medium to large organisations will eventually have individuals working for them who are at risk of infection or who are infected by HIV. To minimise stress to the individuals concerned and over-reactions by staff if the diagnoses are disclosed, effective management structures need to be developed.

Personnel Issues

It is the area of Personnel or Human Resources, that most issues related to HIV infection will be felt in the short to medium term. Knowledge of the psychological reactions to the fear of HIV infection or to the adjustment to the diagnosis, are central for developing an understanding as to how to respond to situations in the workplace.

Fear of AIDS

AIDS often creates hysterical over-reactions due to:

- (a) A lack of understanding of how the virus is transmitted, the image created through the media of AIDS as an uncontrolled plague and
- (b) Difficulties of many individuals to deal with either conflicting views on sexual expression or their own unresolved personal conflicts which AIDS has triggered.

The lack of understanding can be overcome by information, as long as it is both understandable and relevant to the individual concerned. However, those reacting from personal prejudices or a strict moral belief system are often not influenced by information. In extreme forms, AIDS triggers off often severe neurotic reactions. In these cases individuals may have to be transferred to other areas or advised to seek professional assistance.

The fear of AIDS may result in the refusal of employees to work with persons suspected of being infected or at risk of infection. In other cases entire offices have been unnecessarily fumigated when it has been found that a person infected with the virus has used equipment located in the office.

Cases of Infection

Where a case of HIV infection of a worker is reported there are a number of issues to consider: (a) the health of the individual(s) concerned; (b) avoidance of over-reactions by other members of staff; (c) avoidance of infection risk to other workers/customers. All of these involve appropriate management policies.

In general a worker who is infected with HIV is not a risk to other workers if infection control guidelines have been instituted. The virus is not casually transmitted through social interactions. Therefore, there is no medical reason for terminating the employment of the individual concerned (in NSW this action would most probably be illegal under NSW anti-discrimination legislation). However, a worker who is infected may progressively become ill over a number of years, and may require sick leave on more frequent occasions than other workers.

Current medical opinion encourages people to stay at work for as long as possible as this is essential for the individual's own self esteem. However, individuals infected with HIV are advised to reduce stress and make general modifications in lifestyle (for example, stress management, improved diet, reduce drug/alcohol intake, regular sleep, etc). Consequently, the work environment of the individual concerned requires attention to ensure that there is not a negative effect on the individual's health.

To avoid negative reactions from other staff members and to promote an atmosphere where staff will feel able to confide their diagnoses to management/personnel, strict confidentiality guidelines should be developed.

Policy Development

The experience of the Albion Street Centre is that work based problems associated with HIV infection can be minimised by planning and the development of policy guidelines to deal with cases of infection before they occur.

Policy development should include:

- (a) Infection control guidelines;
- (b) Worker education; and
- (c) Procedures to be followed if a case of HIV infection is brought to the attention of the management.

Infection Control

Employees need to know how to avoid infection and/or infecting others in the event of occupational health and safety problems occurring.

Worker Education

AIDS education material addressing the particular concerns of the workforce should be developed and distributed. Preferably this information is part of a general program to avoid occupational health risks.

Procedures in case of infection

The policy should cover:

- a) Who should be informed in the workforce;
- b) Confidentiality issues;
- c) Employee sickness entitlements;
- d) Continued employment of persons infected with HIV;
- e) Antidiscrimination guidelines; and
- f) Staff training.

