

# AIDS UPDATE

## My trip to the AIDS Clinic

By Steve Foiles

After studying AIDS for a year and a half, I thought I understood the subject well. When a close friend died of AIDS this summer, I needed to find out more — and right away.

Specifically, I wanted to know if I "had" AIDS. The first people I turned to were the folks at the AIDS Assessment Clinic in Seattle. They were able to reassure me about my own health and surprisingly, they also gave me some new information. Or, my heightened personal interest made me pay better attention.

I knew the people at the AIDS Clinic pretty well by phone. When I wanted to know the latest number of cases locally, I talked to Dr. Steve Helgerson, nurse-practitioner Carol Dunphy, or Will Jones. I knew the clinic had a long name including Assessment and Surveillance, was run by the Seattle-King County Department of Public Health, and was in the Public Safety Building downtown.

My young friend was dying suddenly from a classic opportunistic disease — the kind you only get when your immune system is wrecked. I knew I was a prime candidate for AIDS. I'd had sex ("exchanged bodily fluids") with him — and with his lover. I had washed his dirty laundry and his dishes and his dog, used his toilet and his towels, cuddled and kissed while watching TV — all more or less regularly over a couple of years.

Finding out my own health status was important. I didn't have much money. I thought of the AIDS Clinic.

Getting there was easier said than done.

I was going to San Francisco for two weeks and wanted to know before I left. I put it off. Friday afternoon, I went down there. The traffic on Second Avenue, no parking spaces, it was late, I felt too upset — so I went home.

Bright and early Monday morning, I got on the ferry and headed back for Seattle and the clinic. The woman told me pleasantly that nobody was in the clinic today.

The clinic isn't open on Monday.

I felt better going in the second time — on familiar territory. I was told to go through the double doors into the waiting room, after giving the woman at the counter my "vitals" for the client file — name, address, birthday, income.

There's a lot more than just the AIDS clinic on the twelfth floor. In the big, bright waiting room, I saw young families with infants, pregnant women, a bunch of people in offices at desks.

Soon, Will Jones came out and invited me into his office. He explained what I would be doing this first day and led me through a maze of passages to an office with a single desk and a window. He gave me a long questionnaire and left, closing the door.

Tuesday, I worked late.

Wednesday, I left for San Francisco.

That night, my friend died.

Next try, I was more sensible. I phoned first. They agreed to squeeze me into the schedule right away. But because we were starting late in the day, I probably wouldn't get through the whole process. (The average visit takes several hours.) I made a second appointment for that Friday. I also made an appointment with my personal physician.

I realized I didn't really know what to expect. I figured they'd take a blood sample and interview me about my medical history. They did a lot more.

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number. The questionnaire was confidential. I was grateful for that. The questions were intimately personal. Medical history. Diseases. Immunizations. Just what exactly with whom how often for how long. Drug use.

The questions about sex acts are so detailed that the forms specialist, an older woman who prepared the booklet, didn't know what some of the terms meant. For example, rimming. Rather than being embarrassed by the explanation, she was heartily amused.

Will came back in and explained some of the questions to me. I wasn't sure about some of the diseases and immunizations. He asked me to think carefully about whether I had had mumps or the vaccine.

Then he led me to another room. This was a small examining room. Desk, examining table, sink. All familiar.

Carol Dunphy came in and went over the questionnaire with me. It was easy not to be embarrassed with her. Somehow, I just trusted her.

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We talked for a long time. I told her all about my friend — all about him, his lover, our friendship, his family, the course of the disease, how the hospital handled it. How I felt about it.

Even during this first visit, before blood tests or anything gory like that, Carol was very reassuring. She let me talk all I wanted. She answered lots of questions and told me plenty. I should have taken notes. But I left feeling much better about my health, already.

The next Friday, I went to see my doctor. He was also very encouraging about my health. I clearly had good disease resistance, healed quickly, and got over things easily. He didn't think I was a good can-

didate for AIDS.

We discussed what blood tests to do. (This is when I needed notes, to avoid costly duplication of tests the clinic would do for free.) We discussed Hepatitis B vaccine. We discussed costs and billing. He told me to stop smoking.

I left his office feeling upbeat. Now, back to the AIDS clinic.

Carol and I talked some more and then she examined me. She took a blood sample and told me what tests would be done. Gamma globulin, white cell count, helper/suppressor T-cell ratio. Something else.

Then came the only real bad part of the whole process, for me: the skin tests. Carol opened a case with four hypodermics. She explained what they all were and what the reaction would be like. She swabbed my right forearm and took out the first needle. I looked away.

"This will sting a little." It did.  
"This will sting a little bit more." It did.

"This one's a little worse. In fact, it really hurts." It really did.

"Okay, that was the worst one. The last one's easy." It was.

The four tests were for reactions to diphtheria/tetanus, TB, mumps and fungus. The mumps hurt the worst, and it also got the biggest reaction. (This was the reason they asked so carefully whether I had had mumps on both sides, and whether I had gotten the vaccine. I still am not really sure.)

By Monday, I had the results. Yes, that's fast. And the blood sample has to be really fresh. The skin tests react within 48-72 hours. Carol gave me a printed sheet which showed me how to read the skin tests myself.

Besides getting reassuring results about my own health, I learned a number of things from my experience. Here are some of them.

It's harder to say definitely that a person is healthy than to say they're sick.

There is no test for AIDS.

The AIDS clinic does not diagnose AIDS. It assesses risks.

There is still disagreement as to which tests are precisely useful, and what different results really mean.

There is a lot more about AIDS that we don't know, than there is that we do know.

A lot of doctors and nurses have been exposed to AIDS and they don't know what to do about it any more than we lunks in the street do.

You're probably going to feel a lot better after you visit the AIDS Assessment Clinic. Downtown in the Public Safety Building. Call first.

just like it says in the AIDS resource list in SGN.

Out on the sidewalk, I did a slow burn at myself.

long questionnaire and left, closing the door.

At the top of the question booklet was a box for the client identification

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