

The “A” Word

By, Esmeralda Servin

Judging by the laughter coming from a conference room at the Red Lion Hanalei Hotel, you would think that Arvella Murray was the guest comedian at this year’s RHEDI conference.

But Murray is no stand-up comedian. She’s an HIV/AIDS health educator. As Executive Director of the Center for Social Support and Education in San Diego, Murray has plenty of experience in HIV/AIDS awareness.

She weaves in a few jokes when she talks about sex and HIV/AIDS, but emphasizes it’s no joke that thousands of people in the United States are infected with the AIDS virus.

In San Diego alone, there have been 10,581 AIDS cases diagnosed as of October 31 of 2000, according to the California Department of Health Services.

“Often times you hear the words whispered because it’s not one of the nice things to talk about,” said Murray.

That’s why Murray’s approach to HIV and AIDS awareness is to preach loud and clear—even to a room full of community health educators.

Murray compares the stigma attached to the topic of HIV and AIDS to what was once known as the “C” word—Cancer. But she hopes that openly speaking about the disease will lead to an increase in prevention.

“If your grandmother is sexually active—yes we do ‘it’ too—she should protect herself,” said Murray.

For Murray, the sex talk applies to every age group, race and economic level.

“It is not who you are, it’s what you’re doing,” she said.

If you’re not using a condom every time you have sex you are increasing your chances of contracting HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS.

“Protect yourself every single time—the virus does not discriminate,” said Murray.

Sex education may have started in sixth grade when you sat in a room full of pre-pubescent 11-year-olds and watched “The Miracle of Life.” But when it comes to health education, safe sex practices shouldn’t end there.

“When your health is concerned, you should always be concerned,” said Murray.

Only monogamy between uninfected partners or complete abstinence eliminates the risk of HIV infection.

“Prevention, prevention, prevention, prevention,” stressed Murray.

Take the time to talk about HIV before having sex. It is also wise to tell your partner if you have ever engaged in any high-risk behavior. You cannot tell if someone is infected with a sexually transmitted disease just by looking at them.

“You may say, ‘But I’m on the pill,’ said Murray.

The pill only prevents pregnancy, not STD’s.

But unless you know your partner’s sexual history, you can potentially be at risk for contracting HIV.

“Advocate for your own well-being,” said Murray.

Many places like community health centers, hospitals, and health departments, offer HIV testing. It's also important to be tested at a location that offers counseling for HIV and AIDS. Counselors can answer questions about risky behaviors and ways you can protect yourself and others in the future.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), HIV home test kits were first licensed in 1998. Currently, the Food and Drug Administration has only approved the Home Access kit.

The testing procedure involves pricking your finger with a special device, putting the droplets of blood on a specially treated card, and then mailing the card in to be tested at a licensed laboratory. You can then call in to get the results of the test by using an identification number.

These are a few places that offer anonymous HIV testing and are free of charge:

Health and Human Services Agency (Anonymous)

3028 Fifth Avenue, San Diego

(619) 296-2120

Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, 7:30 a.m.-4:00 p.m.;

Wednesday 7:30 a.m.-6:30 p.m.;

Friday 11:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.

Central Region Public Health Center (Anonymous/ Confidential)

5202 University Avenue, San Diego

(619) 229-5400

Tuesday 1:00 p.m. -7:30 p.m.

Friday 11:00 a.m. -4:00 p.m.

East Region Public Health Center (Anonymous)

855 East Madison Avenue, El Cajon

(619) 441-6500

Thursday 8:00 a.m.-11:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.- 4:00 p.m.

North Central Public Health Center (Anonymous)

2440 Grand Avenue, San Diego

(858) 490-4400

Thursday 1:00 p.m.- 6:30 p.m.

Also, the Center for Social Support and Education (CSSE), located at 3960 Park Blvd (619) 325-2273, offers HIV and AIDS support groups. The center provides current research data about the topic of HIV and AIDS. Internet access is also available at the CSSE.

Silence may be golden in movie theatres, but when it comes to your health, it's OK to say the "A" word loud and clear.

"We cannot afford to have morality on health," said Murray.