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Forum attendees talk about sex

By: Amy Wooten

Sex and gay men's health were the focal points of a recent rousing discussion at the Center on Halsted.

Project CRYSP and Lifelube.org co-sponsored its first community forum about gay men's health. "'Good' Sex? 'Bad' Sex? Just What Do Gay Men Want, Anyway?" was hosted by Fausto Fernos and Marc Felion (Feast of Fools podcast), and featured panel experts Dr. David Halperin (author of *What Do Gay Men Want?*), DePaul University's Dr. Gary Harper and Northwestern University's Dr. Michele Morales. Although many topics were touched on—from crystal meth to the idea that younger gay men think HIV is a manageable disease—the conversation frequently returned to the stereotyping of the community and communication.

The conversation started by exposing the negative light often cast on gay men by research and science.

Researchers face a "double bind," said Morales. Although it is important to acknowledge the real problems that face a community, such as substance abuse, sometimes focusing on these issues "constructs the idea we are not well as a community," she said. Morales said it's no coincidence that homosexuality and alcoholism emerged as identities around the same time roughly 100 years ago.

Morales pointed out that research tends to focus on the few variables that differ between gay and straight men, and exaggerates findings.

"We are invested in finding problems in our community to show that homophobia and discrimination exists," Morales said. "We have, in fact, backed ourselves into a corner."

"As a society, we tend to demonize what gay men do," Harper said.

Morales stated that it's hard to find medical journals highlighting ways in which gay men are healthier than straight men. In scientific literature, "there's no room for us to be well," she said.

According to the speakers, the gay community also plays a role in this. Harper, who agreed with Morales, discussed how gay men separate themselves from straight men, while youth are redefining what it means to be gay.

"Sometimes we put ourselves in our own boxes," Harper said, adding that gay men also help perpetuate stereotypes and restrictions, for example, of "tops" and "bottoms."

Adding to the problem, Halperin discussed, are the inaccurate psychological concepts used to describe gay men. Researchers are trying to figure out the inner lives of gay

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men and why they engage in risky sex by researching "what makes us behave so badly," Halperin said.

He added that clichés that gay men are acting irrationally or can't control their behavior are being used to describe gay men, and these clichés are damaging.

In fact, Halperin said, gay men have been putting their heads together and taking steps to prevent infection for years. They are also trying to move beyond the old condom rule and trying to explore other means of prevention.

During a question-and-answer session, there was some lively debate on Halperin's claims that it's okay to try other prevention methods, such as serosorting (people of the same HIV status engaging in sexual activities with one another), which was backed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health.

Some audience members expressed concern over whether or not it is too soon. Halperin, however, said that the HIV-positive community has been discussing alternatives in publications such as Poz magazine for years.

"There is a rise in the culture of HIV-positive sexuality being open and vibrant," said Halperin.

During the event, the conversation frequently returned to communication as an answer to many issues. Many agreed that gay men need to start talking to each other about sex.

"We need to be better about communicating about sex," Harper said. "We need to find ways of teaching each other to communicate."

During the question-and-answer session, an HIV-positive man brought up how HIV-positive men are often demonized, even by other gay men. Again, the conversation turned to communication.

"I think we all just need to talk to each other and take responsibility for ourselves and each other, AIDS Foundation of Chicago's Jim Pickett said. "We all need to take responsibility and ownership for ourselves."

"Gay people as a whole need to take collective ownership," Halperin agreed.

Harper suggested that communication is really the answer. "A condom doesn't have to be a barrier," he said. "We live in a sex-phobic society. We need to talk about how fun and exciting sex can be."

Many agreed that the situation is complex, and there are many things gay men are doing that they are not discussing out in the open.

"We don't often talk about these things," Pickett said.

Halperin said people are always trying new and different things, and experimenting with sexual practices.

"This kind of behavior and interaction gave us safe sex practices to begin with," Halperin said.

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Project CRYSP will hold a second community forum June 12 at Center on Halsted.
The topic has not yet been decided.

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