

According to the latest report on sexually transmitted diseases in South Australia issued in October this year, of all the individuals diagnosed with HIV, 89 percent were males and 11 percent females. Of those males, 73 percent reported male-to-male sexual contact, 7 percent reported injecting drug use and 5 percent reported both risk factors.

28,099 people have been identified as having HIV in Australia. Of these, 10,327 have been diagnosed with AIDS. 6,762 people in Australia have died as a result of AIDS-related illnesses.

World Aids Day on Dec 1 has the slogan "Take Action, No Discrimination", as health authorities and social workers continue to fight to raise awareness of the disease. Heterosexual transmission was reported by 66 percent of females diagnosed with HIV infection, with 26 percent of females reporting injecting drug use.

Breakfast, and next to the coffee and poached eggs is a colourful selection of pills. Six in total but before Brian North takes each one he inhales and recites: "in with the goodness, out with the badness." Despite their different sizes and names, each of these tablets has one thing in common; they stop Brian's HIV turning into AIDS.

"The regime used to be very difficult. You would have to take tablets in the morning, tablets at night or you might've had to take tablets during the day," Brian says.

Now it is just once in the morning. However Brian has not always taken his medication. When he met his partner Darren at an AIDS retreat, he had been avoiding it for four years.

"I didn't want to take medication and all that, and he was the one who actually helped me deal with it," he says.

Darren's death, three years and five days later, made him face his mortality and his medication. He has now been living with HIV for 15 and a half years. Medication that prevents HIV turning into AIDS comes at a cost and it is not just financial. One of his tablets, Kivexa has an alert card he must carry at all times.

Side effects are listed as fever, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, a rash, shortness of breath, even "a life-threatening lowering of your blood pressure or death."

BEING POSITIVE

More than 20 years after HIV and AIDS first began to take its toll on the world's homosexual and intravenous drug-using communities, **Louise Pascale** finds mystery and stigma still surround the condition in South Australia.

Despite the risks these medications allow HIV positive people to remain healthy and live longer, giving young gay men the impression you can manage it with one lot of tablets a day.

AIDS Council of South Australia Executive Director Shane Dinnison hears this first hand. "Some people say if I do get it, it's inevitable that I get it, and it's only a couple of pills a day, but in fact HIV medications in particular increase a whole lot of other medical conditions that lead to morbidity," says Shane. He is most alarmed by some reactions to being HIV positive.

"I've been in contact with younger guys who have got a positive diagnosis and seen their career pathway as disability support pension and public housing," admits Shane. So far this year, Sexual Health Clinic 275 has diagnosed 21 new cases in South Australia. Of them, 14 had homosexual sex with men. This is up by 65 percent from the same time last year. After more than 20 years of HIV and AIDS in the gay community, sexual health educators are still trying to find an effective prevention campaign that does not rely on the grim reaper. Most recently VICAIDS conducted a controversial campaign that focused on

men's strategies to stay HIV negative. Their website, Staying Negative, encourages gay men of all ages to talk about remaining negative in today's community, something some HIV positive men believe does more damage than good.

"They say the campaign stigmatizes HIV positive men but our position is that HIV negative men have the right to talk about how they manage to stay HIV negative," says Colin Batrouney, Manager of Health Promotion at VICAIDS. He believes the underlying principle of the site is that no one wants to be HIV positive.

But to do that, gay men need to change their attitudes towards their health. "We want to make testing a part of, particularly, gay men's repertoire like their general health repertoire," says Shane.

This can be difficult as not all men tell their GPs about their sexuality. While the number of those being tested decreases, those living with the illness still hope for a vaccine. Brian believes this is what keeps him going.

"I think part of the reason that keeps me going is that I don't want to die. I just want to enjoy my life and get on with it really, (rather) than sit around and be a sad AIDS or HIV victim."

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