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## New Study Shows Most HIV-Positive Patients Disclose Condition Despite Insensitivity from Some Health Care Providers

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**NEWS RELEASE**

**NEW STUDY SHOWS MOST HIV-POSITIVE PATIENTS DISCLOSE CONDITION DESPITE INSENSITIVITY FROM SOME HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS**

DAYTON, Ohio — Despite the stigma, most patients who are HIV-positive disclose their condition to their health care providers, but doctors and dentists need to do a better job of making patients feel comfortable enough to open up, according to a new study from the University of Dayton and the University of Colorado.

Reactions of health care providers during initial visits were “almost universally reported as negative, face-threatening experiences,” according to results of the study, which will be published in the August issue of the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. When patients revealed their condition, many felt they received inadequate care or were treated poorly.

“The more comfortable they felt with the health care provider, the more easily they were able to disclose the information,” says Teresa L. Thompson, professor of communication at the University of Dayton, who specializes in health communication. “If doctors communicate abruptly and impatiently with patients, the patients will be less likely to tell them. It’s important for health care providers to know this because they need to care for the patients and protect themselves from infection. If providers want disclosure, then an open, trustworthy relationship with all patients is necessary.”

Researchers say it’s the first study to examine the process of disclosing HIV to health care providers — doctors, dentists, specialists, nurses and emergency room personnel. The study consisted of a pilot phase — 45-minute interviews with seven patients who volunteered for the study — and 1,950 surveys mailed to AIDS organizations in 12 cities around the country. Researchers also e-mailed the survey to AIDS/HIV electronic discussion groups. Of the respondents, who filled out the survey in 1996, 75 percent were homosexual, 10 percent were bisexual and 15 percent were heterosexual. The response rate was 4.8 percent from the hard-copy survey and 5.7 percent from the electronic version.

The survey examined the behavior of patients and health care providers when patients revealed that they are HIV-positive. Seven out of 10 respondents willingly shared the HIV-

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status information with their doctors. Another 17.5 percent said their doctors found out in another way, such as from a medical history form or through a direct question. In 12 percent of the cases, the health care provider never knew the patient was HIV positive. The study was conducted by Thompson and Louis P. Cusella, both communication professors at the University of Dayton, and Robert R. Agne, a doctoral student in communication at the University of Colorado.

According to the survey, 45 percent told health care providers their status, but said nothing else. Another 27.5 percent expressed a sense of responsibility when they disclosed the information. A few (7.5 percent) told their providers in an indirect way: "I need a doctor who feels comfortable with HIV-positive patients." More than half (57.5 percent) said they disclosed the information because they wanted to monitor the development of the virus, fight an illness or develop a strategy for fighting the virus. Nearly 36 percent said they felt a responsibility to protect the provider and themselves.

Respondents said they did not feel embarrassed if health care providers acted friendly, compassionate or trustworthy. However, in personal interviews, patients shared mostly negative stories of the initial reactions from providers.

"After disclosure, the respondents perceived nervousness, fear and anxiety; the interactions became awkward, nervous or hostile," the researchers write. "Some doctors would immediately excuse themselves and return much later wearing a mask, gloves, eye protection and an additional smock. An ophthalmologist changed his (communication) style from professional and friendly to hurried and nervous. A surgeon backed up to the wall behind him in fear, eyes wide. He left the room and was overheard refusing to treat the patient; a superior ordered him back into the room. The surgeon was then belligerent and resentful and removed stitches roughly and carelessly. The patient told him, 'Hey, be careful, I'm still a person. I'm not dead.' All these face-threatening reactions devastated the patients."

The researchers say the study's findings suggest that a positive patient/health care provider relationship is important when patients decide whether or not to disclose that they are HIV-positive. "Providing social support is important," write the researchers, who urge more sensitivity from health care providers. "A matter-of-fact but compassionate response to HIV disclosures" allows patients to save face and avoid the stigma attached to the disease.

The survey received a response rate lower than the researchers wanted — possibly because of the nature of the study. "People who are willing to respond to a questionnaire about self-disclosure probably would be more likely to disclose the information to health care providers," Thompson notes. "People who are not comfortable responding to this survey are probably also less likely to immediately disclose information. That gives us reason for concern."