

Dear Discover Magazine,

The October 19 interview with Celia Farber contained an egregious misstatement of reality that needs to be put straight. People's health and lives are placed needlessly in jeopardy if they take Ms. Farber seriously.

Ms. Farber stated:

“And one of the studies that the so-called dissidents have been drawing attention to is a study by a Berkeley researcher named Nancy Padian. Her study looked at transmission between couples where one was positive and one was negative. They had unprotected sex. They watched them over a period of 10 years. And there was not one single transmission in the whole group [during the 10-year study]—not one.”

That statement is an appalling departure from the truth. First, while the study spanned 10 years, attrition of couples was severe. The longest any one couple participated in the study was 6 years, and only 175 couples could be followed over a total of 282 couple-years; an average of just 1.6 years/couple, hardly the 10 years asserted by Ms. Farber.

Second, while some couples had unprotected sex, many couples used condoms and refrained from risky sexual behavior. In fact, the primary objective of the study was to assess the effectiveness of counseling in altering behavior to reduce or eliminate identified risk factors among discordant (one HIV+, one HIV-) heterosexual couples. At their first visit 32% of couples reported consistent condom use and at their final visit, 74% reported such use with most of that change occurring between the first and second visit. Visits were at 6 month intervals. In addition, abstinence went up (0% to 15%), and anal intercourse went down (38% to 8%).

While no new HIV infections were observed during the study (which reflects the effectiveness of the counseling in altering behavior) 70 infections between the couples were reported at study entry. The rate of transmission from male to female was estimated to be .0009, or about 1 in 1,000 contacts which corresponds closely to that seen in other studies (1).

Dr. Padian has stated that interpretations such as Ms. Farber's are fallacious and without merit. Dr. Padian addressed this squarely in a piece for AIDStruth.org where she states:

“In short, the evidence for the sexual transmission of HIV is well documented, conclusive, and based on the standard, uncontroversial methods and practices of medical science. Individuals who cite the 1997 Padian et al. publication or data from other studies by our research group in an attempt to substantiate the myth that HIV is not transmitted sexually are ill informed, at best. Their misuse of these results is misleading, irresponsible, and potentially injurious to the public.”

She also pointed out that *“heterosexual intercourse is now responsible for 70-80% of all HIV transmissions worldwide (2).”*

Given the bizarre misrepresentation by Ms. Farber, she either has not read the study or is incapable of understanding a scientific paper. The outrageous and inaccurate claims she made regarding the study's results must not go unchallenged nor the correction unreported.

The Padian paper was published in the American Journal of Epidemiology and is available online at:

<http://aje.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/search?fulltext=padian&x=13&y=6>

Sincerely,

Robert Funkhouser
AIDStruth.org

1. Brookmeyer R, Gail M. AIDS epidemiology: a quantitative approach. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
2. Downs AM, De Vincenzi I. Probability of heterosexual transmission of HIV: relationship to the number of unprotected sexual contacts. European Study Group in Heterosexual Transmission of HIV. J Acquir Immune Defic Syndr Hum Retrovirol. 1996 Apr 1;11(4):388-95.