

Positive women, healthy choices

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ACON has recently launched a campaign to affirm positive women's sexuality and help them make healthy sexual choices. SERA PINWILL explains the background to the project.

Healthy Sexual Choices is a campaign developed after discussions with women attending the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON) "City Escape" retreat in 2001. At the retreat, positive women described a range of feelings around sex and sexuality after testing positive for HIV. These included shock, anger, denial, depression, grief, fear and confusion — particularly around disclosure, transmission and potential rejection.

In February last year, ACON formed a working group to discuss ways we could promote a positive woman's right to healthy sexuality. The group felt that the campaign images would need to be eye-catching without being too sexually graphic, in order to include women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

A group of HIV-positive women came together to further explore notions of sexual autonomy, defining 'healthy sexual choices' and discrimination. They also discussed the possibility of using photographs of HIV-positive women in the campaign as a strategy to highlight their visibility.

While all the women contacted agreed that photographs would be ideal and a powerful statement, they were unwilling to participate on a personal level, due to concerns about uncontrolled disclosure to their communities and negative impact on children and families.

Focus groups responded most positively to images that were contemporary, colourful depictions of women looking sexy, confident and healthy, without being too confrontational. In the series of three postcard images chosen for the campaign, women are depicted doing activities such as speaking on the phone while holding a baby, sitting in a traditional yoga position and lying in bed with a partner, holding a condom packet.

The two larger poster images show women of different cultures looking happy and attractive, both alone and with a partner. The postcard and poster images are also used in the campaign booklet, *Positively Intimate*, written by an HIV-positive woman in an informal style that focus groups responded well to.

ACON chose the eve of International Women's Day 2003 to celebrate and launch the campaign. The launch brought together positive women and service providers who work closely with positive women. Because it was felt that media attention would detract from the celebration and cause undue stress around confidentiality for positive women who wished to attend, the media were not present for the launch.

The author of *Positively Intimate* spoke about her experiences as a newly diagnosed HIV-positive woman coming to terms with her sexuality and relationships. She mentioned the strategies she had used to boost her self-esteem and increase the chances of success for her current relationship. Feedback from the launch was overwhelmingly positive, and several hundred booklets, postcards and posters were distributed.

The postcards, posters and booklets will be distributed to regional ACON offices, selected pharmacies, women's health centres, community health centres, S100 prescribers, sexual health services, HIV services and Needle and Syringe Programs in NSW. Positive women's services in other states will also receive copies.

Early responses to the campaign have been favourable. Several positive women in touch with ACON's Women, HIV and Health Promotion Project have told us that the resource has been a focus point for discussion with partners around issues of safe sex, condoms and trust.

The campaign will be formally evaluated on its design, style, relevance of information and numbers distributed. Key service providers will be asked about the [effectiveness](#) [1](Of a drug or treatment). The maximum ability of a drug or treatment to produce a result regardless of dosage. A drug passes efficacy trials if it is effective at the dose tested and against the illness for which it is prescribed. In the standard procedure, Phase II clinical trials gauge efficacy, and Phase III trials confirm it. of the resources, their impact on clients and any client comments. For further information on the campaign, to obtain copies of the Healthy Sexual Choices materials, or to provide

feedback, contact Sera Pinwill at ACON on (02) 9206 2015 or spinwill@acon.org.au [2].

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- [Positive women](#)

Links:

[1] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/486>

[2] <mailto:spinwill@acon.org.au>