

Destigmatisation Campaign

On the 20th of February 2008 5 HIV-positive women unveiled their faces as part of a public campaign to make New Zealanders question their assumptions about those living with the HIV virus

Over the next two months their profiles will appear on buses, in women's magazines, and websites and postcards being distributed throughout the country as part of a destigmatisation campaign being mounted by Positive Women Inc.

Positive Women's national co-ordinator Jane Bruning says the aim is to challenge the stereotypes by letting the women tell their own stories.

"Many people think HIV won't touch them, that it's a risk confined to specific sectors of our community," she says. "We are saying the risk is a lot closer to home - our faces and our stories are not so different to many New Zealand women."

The stigma associated with HIV and AIDS is such that almost all HIV-positive women keep their HIV status a secret, fearing negative reactions and discrimination against themselves and their families.

Since antibody testing was introduced in New Zealand in 1985, almost 2500 people have been diagnosed with HIV in New Zealand of whom about 400 are women. Over recent years the rate of heterosexual HIV infection in New Zealand has steadily increased to the point in 2006 where it outpaced that of men who have sex with men.

Jane Bruning believes that New Zealanders have become complacent about the risk. It takes a lot of courage, she says, for her fellow Positive Women members to go public about their status but they believed it was important to educate others.

"The truth is that those living with HIV in New Zealand today are everyday people leading everyday lives," she says. "No matter how a person contracts HIV, they shouldn't have to deal with the added burden of stigmatisation on top of chronic health problems."

Many women diagnosed with HIV were unaware of their risk of infection, Jane Bruning says. "They were women in love, women having a fun night out or women who threw caution to the wind."

For Wellington postie, Beate Lutz, the campaign is about making the public realize that contracting HIV can happen to anyone. Since contracting the virus from her husband, she has encountered a lot of wrong assumptions and bizarre beliefs.

"People don't know much about HIV and so they fear it," she says. "I want people to be aware that there are women as well dealing with this and we should not each feel alone."

Southland grandmother Jan Waddell contracted HIV from a contaminated needle while nursing. She counts herself lucky in having supportive family and friends when she knows of many other HIV-positive people who have lost their jobs, and contact with family members or friends.

"The stigma attached to HIV is a fear of the unknown," she says. "A lot of people have this strange idea that we are different, they are afraid of us, and so, whenever possible avoid any contact with us. We are no different to anyone else and that's the message we need to get across."

Jan Waddell agreed to be a Positive Women campaign face because she sees a big need for more education about the HIV virus – the risks, transmission and prevention. "Unless people hear a voice or see the face of HIV, their misconceptions and the resulting stigma will stay."