

# Drug advisers quit key AIDS charity

The Terrence Higgins Trust suffered a major blow to its credibility as an across-the-board AIDS agency when in early June leading drug advisers resigned saying, "The needs of drug users cannot be met in such an organisation." But the Trust believes this crisis will prove to be a turning point in the gay-based charity's attempts to extend itself into the mainly heterosexual drug using population.

The six advisers were members of the Trust's Drug Education Group, workers from the drugs field recruited on a volunteer basis to guide the Trust through unfamiliar drugs territory. Their resignations came in the form of an open letter to the Trust's directors (extracts below).

According to one active member who is not resigning, disillusionment with the Trust is practically universal in the group. Martin Donoghoe of the Monitoring Research Group says many members have voted with their feet, the number of regular attenders dwindling from 15-20 two years ago to barely enough to be called a group.

Though fully supporting the six who are quitting, with just two years of what he calls "false promises" behind him, he is not

yet ready to give up all hope of the Trust getting it together on drugs. Another non-resigning member speaks of the group being repeatedly "kicked in the teeth" by the Trust and of it taking years for letters to be answered.

After nearly three years in the group, Radhe Bentley of ADFAM says she and the others resigning have "absolutely no confidence in the Trust" ever producing answers to the needs of drug users.

Their main complaint is that the Trust has acted as if tackling HIV among drug users can be tacked onto its work with homosexuals, rather than dealt with as a priority requiring special strategies.

Ironically they are leaving just as the Trust is establishing a separate drugs team headed by a Drug Services Coordinator with management-level authority.

Until now drugs work has been split up under units to do with education, counselling, information, etc. In future drug users will be the only sub-group of the at risk population to have a unit 'of their own' at the Trust, a move which can be considered an important achievement on the part of the Drug Education Group.

Splitting off drugs work was "not an easy decision" said the Trust. Resolving policy wrangles

such as this has seriously retarded the Trust's drugs work.

Assurances of a better future for drugs work at the Trust did not impress Radhe Bentley. "They've been saying that for three years," was her response. "Their attitude is that anyone can deal with drugs. I wish the Trust would have the nerve to say, 'We are a gay organisation; everything else, forget it.' Then they'd be dealing with the people they're used to."

In a swiftly prepared response to the resignations (extracts below) the Terrence Higgins Trust admitted that adapting to drugs work had been "a painful experience". But the Trust's Press Officer Nick Partridge claimed that prejudice against drug users and homosexual camaraderie off-putting to 'straight' drug users were both things of the past.

With the experienced drugs researcher Betsy Ettore now heading their drugs team, the Trust is firmly looking forward to recreating and expanding its drug work. "In some ways this is a watershed", said Nick Partridge. The Trust's Chief Executive Martin Eede says the drugs budget of £181,000 this financial year is planned to rise to £335,000 next year and to £422,000 in 1991/2.

But the Trust now faces a

situation where HIV positive drug users have established their own support networks and where other AIDS organisations such as London Lighthouse are setting up groups for drug users.

It remains to be seen what place the THT can occupy in this new situation, having lost ground in the years of protracted disputes.

Established as a form of gay self-help organisation, it has clearly been difficult for the Trust to embrace the needs of 'outsiders' such as drug users. More detached observers believe the dispute between the Trust and its advisers over the priority to be given to drugs work has been compounded by differences over styles of work.

Unlike the Trust's other volunteer groups, the drugs group work every day with drugs and AIDS issues in their employment. Attempts to import this professionalism into the Trust have been frustrated by a structure geared to volunteer effort driven by compassion and fellow-feeling rather than to hard-headed service delivery.

Rocketed to prominence by sudden massive government grants such as last year's £400,000, the Trust has, even its friends admit, still to develop the organisation to handle the enormous task before it.

## We quit. Extracts from a letter to the Terrence Higgins Trust from six volunteer drug advisers.

...There is an assumption in the Trust that drug issues can be taken on without any clear thought or strategies and that they are merely part of the baggage of HIV infection ...

There have been ever-diminishing rewards for our efforts... and constant disappointments, not only in matters directly related to improving services for drug users but also, more importantly, in the constant negation of sound drug policies and in the Trust's generally negative attitudes towards drug users ...

Over the past year no new client-related services have been created; no up-to-date health education material has been produced ...; the once thriving support group has apparently been allowed to collapse for a year; and the face-to-face counselling service for drug users has been largely inoperative. Surely these are symptoms of a service in decline rather than of one which places the needs of drug users at the top of the agenda ...

We have never received satisfactory information on how [drugs] moneys have been spent. In our opinion, the Trust's vaunted commitment to drug issues is merely tokenistic ... Surely it is time for [the Trust] to admit that it has failed to build on its promising beginnings in the field of drugs and HIV. The Trust has never learnt how to work effectively with drug users: they meet with mainly two responses — either panic and terror, or misplaced generosity...

All the indications are that the Trust ... will continue to marginalise drug issues. The drug-related staff operate within ever confined circumstances and an already stressful job is made doubly so by what seem to be interminable wranglings over policy and practice. The needs of drug users cannot be met in such an organisation ...

Radhe Bentley, Steve Cranfield, Heidi Gilhooly, Raymond Molloy, Geraldine Mulleady, Michael Read

## A statement from the Terrence Higgins Trust. Past problems admitted but commitment to re-establish and expand its services for drug users.

As we all know, AIDS agencies in the UK and the USA arose from and addressed primarily the concerns of gay men ... However, with increasing numbers of injecting drug users found seropositive (16 per cent of the total number in the UK), AIDS agencies have needed to expand their focus ... In the nine months from April to December 1988, the Trust spent £65,000 (excluding building and general administration costs) on drugs related education and services ... 17.6 per cent of our total direct charitable expenditure ...

This expansion of our work ... has not been an easy process. Rather, it has been a painful experience for the gay community organising around AIDS service provision. For example, recognising the needs of drug users and providing help for this group within a primarily gay context has had to be built positively, as an affirmation of the needs of all those infected with HIV. Sharing the same public stigma (as 'AIDS victims') ... has been the foundation for a real if not natural 'service provision attraction' between gay men and drug users.

[Establishing the] Drug Education Group ... was a move to lessen the gap between the gay community and the drug using community ... it was a sincere attempt to draw drug experts into the Trust's work and to build upon an already established expertise.

While there has been some resistance to this work within and outside of the Trust [it] has been fruitful. Currently the Trust is expanding its commitment to the development of services for drug users concerned about AIDS. By late autumn of this year we hope to have a full drugs team including a Drug Development Officer, Prison Liaison Officer, Drugs Counselling Officer, Drugs Education Officer and a Prisons Resources Officer. Because of this growth we would also like to expand the membership of our Drug Education Group ...