

HIV: the gremlin on my shoulder

Sixteen years ago, skills trainer and mother of two Alice Welbourn was diagnosed HIV positive. She writes about life with the world's most sensationalised disease

Photograph by **Brian Moody**



'For the first and only time in my life, I contemplated killing myself'

The question most people wonder, but are too polite to ask, is: how did you get HIV? But I don't tell people on purpose. If I were to say how I contracted it, they might think, 'Those aren't my circumstances so I'm all right.' But I've met HIV-positive women from all walks of life, so I know that's a risky assumption.

I know young people who stopped using condoms in a new relationship because they thought they and their partner were free of STIs, even though we often don't know ourselves when we have these conditions. I've met older women whose husbands had flings while travelling for work, then died before their wives were diagnosed HIV positive. They aren't tell their own families for fear they won't be allowed to cuddle their grandchildren.

The United Nations agency for HIV and AIDS states that, in many parts of the world, women are most at risk in their marriage beds. While the number of people diagnosed in Britain may seem low, the statistics are rising each year. According to the Health Protection Agency, new diagnoses have risen by 182% in 10 years, from 2,764 in 1997 to

7,800 in 2006. Since 1999, heterosexual transmission has overtaken homosexual transmission. It's not something to take lightly.

I learned I had HIV in 1992. During a routine antenatal check-up my doctor suggested I also have an HIV test. I was 18 months into a new relationship, pregnant, my seven-year-old daughter and five-year-old son were starting a new school, and I was full of hope. Then my life lay in ruins. After telling me, my doctor gave me a huge hug – and in those days, most people weren't sure whether that was wise. She asked me whether I would like to tell my partner and, when I said 'yes', kindly offered to do it for me. We came home together and she went to tell him while I sat in shock on the sofa watching telly with the children, holding them close.

My partner, who is also a doctor, worked in international community health, focusing on HIV. Little did we know the disease would take over our lives. His immediate response was wonderful. My GP chatted to the children while he embraced me in the next room. Very few women I have spoken to ►