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Unchanging attitudes to HIV By Mary O'Hara

ANDY Hewlett was 25 years old and just one year into a new career in the police force when he was diagnosed with HIV, leaving him "confused and bewildered". It also left him convinced that his life was over. But that was 15 years ago and now — as with tens of thousands of people diagnosed around the same time — radical improvements in treatment mean that he is well and his career is flourishing.

Hewlett says he feels lucky to have been diagnosed when he was, because advances in the treatment for HIV "shifted things from a terminal illness to a manageable chronic condition".

The UK National Aids Trust (NAT) has published the first in-depth UK research into the views of people with HIV in the workplace. Hewlett, who has been a pivotal figure in developing

the London Metropolitan police force's (the Met) policies around managing HIV, hopes it will help to put prejudice and ignorance about HIV into context. "This new research is encouraging because it shows that people with HIV are just like everybody else and do as good a job as anyone," he says. "My hope is that it will help break down prejudice."

Researchers found that the majority of people living with HIV were satisfied with their work and how they were treated. In fact, over half of the gay men who responded said HIV had no impact on their working life, and 75 per cent reported that the disclosure of their HIV status at work had been "generally positive".

The study also found that there was "no significant" difference between how HIV positive men and HIV nega-

tive men viewed their experience at work. Meanwhile, "despite perception", the research concluded "there was no significant difference in the number of days sick leave" taken by people with HIV compared with those without a diagnosis. Some 70 per cent of HIV positive men had had no HIV-related sick days in the last 12 months.

According to the NAT, this is all "welcome and encouraging" stuff, but its chief executive, Deborah Jack, stresses that it is far from the whole picture. Evidence emerged from the study of persistent residual prejudice around HIV, as well as a fear on the part of some workers with HIV that they will be discriminated against if they disclose their status to colleagues or employers.

Just over a fifth (21 per cent) of men who had disclosed their HIV status said

they had been on the receiving end of discrimination in either their current or previous job, and many believed their disclosure was the reason they had lost a previous job.

According to Jack, it is concerns such as these that should provide an impetus for educating employers and galvanising the campaigners for government to introduce an extra layer of employment rights to guard against "inadvertent or outright" discrimination.

The research shows that people continue to be more reluctant to be open about having HIV, suggesting that there is still some way to go before people with HIV feel comfortable about revealing it. While 92 per cent of respondents had disclosed their sexuality at work, only 60 per cent had told someone at work about their HIV status. ■

— The Guardian, London