



A tip of the cap for a McGill prof

Susan Pinker

If you have questions about pelvic exams, sexuality, gay health care or STDs, Pierre Tellier is the man to see. He may be the only physician in the world to own a silver cervical cap, but the Tip of the Cap Award he received for his work in adolescent health and sexuality is a perfectly fitting way to honour someone who loves to talk about matters that make most of us blush.

Tellier, the director of Student Health Services at McGill University, likes nothing more than discussing sensitive issues — unless it is helping other doctors deal with topics that are considered taboo. What should the doctor do if a patient gets an erection during a testicular exam? How can medical residents overcome their discomfort when taking a sexual history? How can they respond to questions on gay or lesbian health? What should they do when patients tell them they have been sexually assaulted?

Tellier, an associate professor in McGill's Department of Family Medicine, says these issues sometimes surface only because "someone has enough guts to ask." But instead of shying away from these teachable moments, he looks for them. "If I find something interesting — it could be sexuality or gay-lesbian issues — I know it will be interesting to other people," he says.

The preoccupations of adolescents and university students are Tellier's bread and butter, but he is especially keen to teach physicians and medical students about sex because "sexuality is what adolescent health is all about."

His work doesn't end at McGill's front gate. He received his Tip of the Cap Award for his 10 years as a volunteer and board president of a community center for street kids, but that is just one aspect of his commitment to sexual health education.

Soft-spoken, unassuming and hospitable, Tellier wears his allegiances on his sleeve. He greets me wearing a zippered sweater decorated with *fleurs-de-lis*, under which peeks a wild blue and orange tie designed by gay artist Keith Haring. Tellier says only that he is at home with both official languages, and that the tie was a gift from the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association after he organized its

annual banquet. His professional connections to the gay community include advising a make-up artist on Kaposi's sarcoma lesions and providing medical care during the annual Gay Pride dance. He has also been the primary physician at the annual Black and Blue Party, a weekend "rave" attended by 10 000 people.

"I had never been to any of these events before and it was interesting to see what was going on," says Tellier. "I started reading up on party drugs like ecstasy [methylenedioxymethamphetamine], GHB [gamma hydroxybutyrate] and special K [ketamine], and providing some medical resources on what happens to people who take them."

He adds that even though he enjoys dancing, he's primarily an observer who provides medical care. "It's a bit of voyeurism. What happens at these events? Why do people dance all night? Essentially, I'm a straight little kid. I've never been very worldly."

Born in Joliette, Que., Tellier moved to Pembroke, Ont., when he was 10. After applying to medical school on a dare, he discovered that being gay on campus in the early '70s meant being an outsider. "I had a bad time in university, but I went through it quietly, progressively." Family medicine was simply "the quickest way out." He never anticipated that family medicine would eventually become the medium through which he could explore a wide range of interests, both personal and professional.

And although he doesn't feel that being gay has a big impact on his work as a physician, Tellier does agree that his experience of feeling different as a university student may have indirectly drawn him into helping others in a similar situation. "One of the things that gay people say is that you're all alone. Now there are more open role models."

Daniel Murphy, now a 27-year-old family medicine resident at Université de Montréal, says Tellier's "relaxed friendliness" was inspiring. "He set up gay and lesbian faculty to be mentors to medical students, and this helped my transition. It helped me feel less isolated — less in the minority. He was a mentor to me, and showed me what a good family doctor is." ?



Pierre Tellier, overlooking the McGill campus