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Controversial "Bug Chasing" Film Debuts

Features Interviews With Gay Men Who Purposely Contracted HIV

(Berlin) A film about so-called "bug chasers" had its premiere Tuesday at the Berlin International Film Festival. The motion picture, completed only days before its screening, features interviews with gay men mainly from San Francisco, who purposely contract HIV.

"The Gift" from filmmaker Louise Hogarth comes on the heels of last month's controversial Rolling Stone article on the phenomenon.

The article quoted a San Francisco doctor as saying at least 25 percent of gay men newly infected with the HIV virus had deliberately sought it out, a quote the doctor later denied making. Although Hogarth's film does not claim the practice is widespread, her interviews feature a number of men who have deliberately sought out the virus and some who continue to have unsafe sex despite being HIV positive.

One man identified in the film as 'Ken' recounts the time he found out he had contracted the virus.

"I was relieved. I didn't have to worry. Do I need to be careful -- not any more," he says in the film.

The main focus of the motion picture is a 21 year old San Francisco man named Doug Hitzel. He also chose to become infected with HIV. He now regrets his decision.

"I've made a terrible mistake and there's no fixing that. There is no benefit in this and that's what needs to be said," says Hitzel.

Some interviewees describe a feeling of guilt many without the virus can feel, a sense of not belonging to a brotherhood of the infected.

Others describe an apparent rise of unsafe sex among gay men and an increase in parties advertising it.