

## In Her Skin: Oshawa women's health forum focuses on HIV/AIDS Aboriginal healing incorporated into forum



Sabrina Byrnes / Metroland

OSHAWA -- Devorah Garland, with the AIDS Committee of Durham Region, addressed guests during the In Her Skin Forum, held at the Shrine Club. The event was presented by the AIDS Committee of Durham Region. March 21, 2014.

By Reka Szekely

OSHAWA -- The focus was on women's health at the second annual In Her Skin forum hosted by the AIDS committee of Durham Region last week and it all kicked off with an Aboriginal smoke ceremony.

Representatives from various organizations that provide services in the community, including health and social services, attended the event at the Oshawa and District Shrine Club on March 21.

In 2011, the most recent year for which statistics are available, women accounted for 21 per cent of HIV infections compared to 79 per cent for men. That's a higher rate than the historical trend. Between 1985 and 2011, women accounted for 16 per cent of HIV infections.

The goal of the forum was to help community groups support women who are HIV positive and women who are at risk of HIV infection. A total of 27,420 people are believed to be living with HIV in Ontario.

Devorah Garland is the program co-ordinator for the Women and HIV/AIDS Initiative for the AIDS Committee of Durham. She listed a number of

issues that come into play for women who are most at risk of contracting HIV.

"Things like poverty, housing and food insecurity, being racialized, marginalized and stigmatized in different ways," she said.

Statistics show only about half of women who have multiple sex partners engage in safe sex, a rate lower than that of men. Ms. Garland said part of the problem is that women can find themselves in unequal relationships where they don't feel they can negotiate condom use.

This can include domestic violence, but also other factors like economic dependence or having a disability.

"If a woman is financially or physically dependent on a man for her shelter or her children's shelter, where is she in a position to say 'I won't have sex with you without a condom'?"

Ms. Garland pointed out that female condoms, at roughly \$3 each, are much more expensive than male condoms. Both are available for free at the Durham Regional Sexual Health Clinics.

The event began with a smoke ceremony conducted by shaman Rita Liepins. Ms. Liepins also conducted a presentation on Aboriginal tools for healing from sexual abuse. The hands-on demonstration involved Ms. Liepins using the Navajo marriage basket as a healing tool.

"Encouraging women to release trauma in their lives is a very healing thing to do," said Ms. Garland during the demonstration. "This is one way of doing it."

For more information about HIV/AIDS and local resources, visit [www.aidsdurham.com](http://www.aidsdurham.com).

Reporter Reka Szekely covers the City of Oshawa for Metroland Media Group's Durham Region Division. Reka's social media column appears every other week. Contact her on Facebook, Twitter (@rszekely)