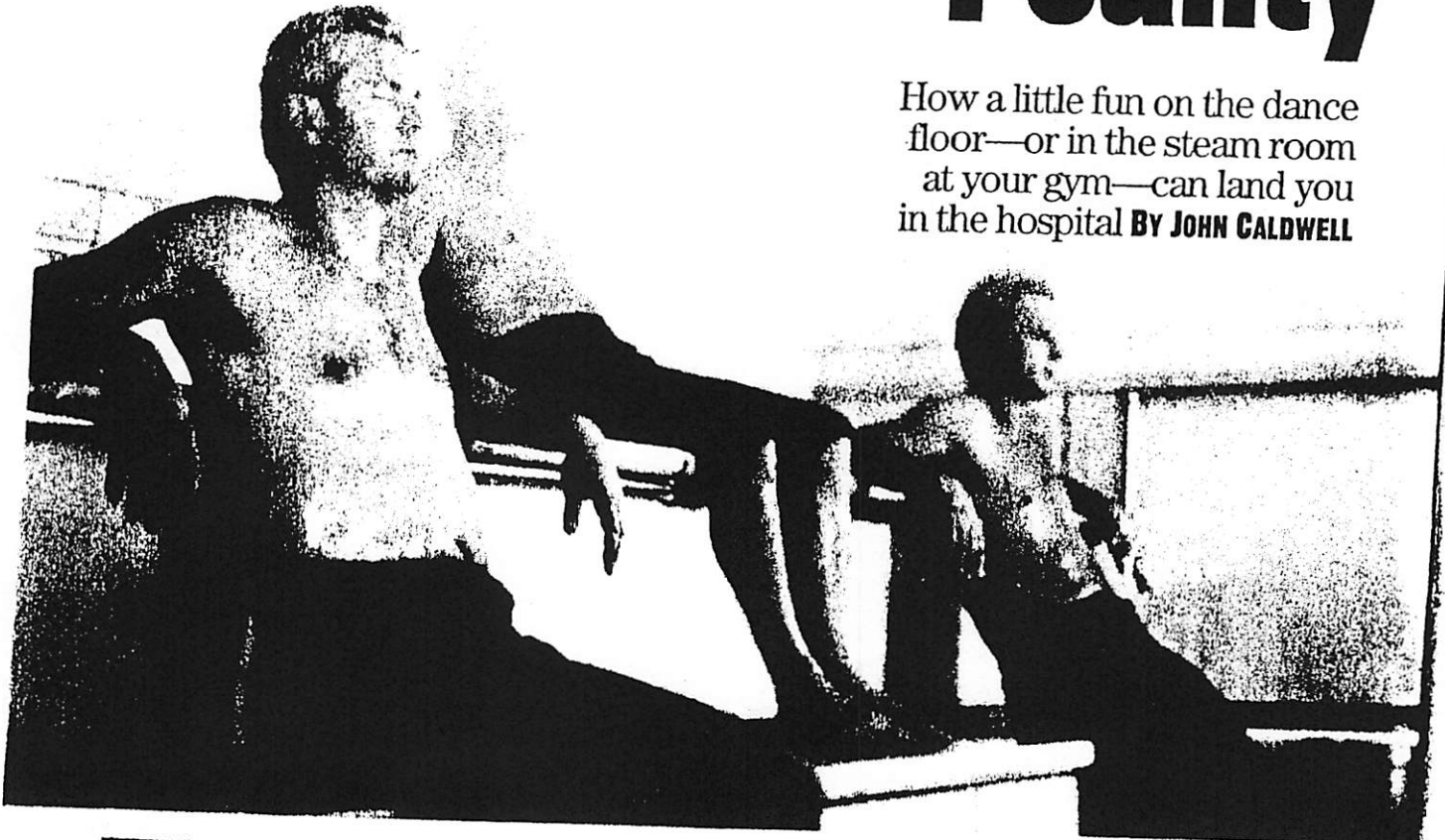


Staph's scary reality

How a little fun on the dance floor—or in the steam room at your gym—can land you in the hospital **BY JOHN CALDWELL**



The illness appearing among Mark Davis's friends can't begin to compare with what he saw at the beginning of the AIDS pandemic more than two decades ago.

But what is happening today has Davis so alarmed that he is compelled to draw a comparison anyway. "Suddenly, there is this new threat that is happening very rapidly," he says. "A lot of people have heard a little bit about this thing, but they know nothing about it."

The 39-year-old Los Angeles man wishes everyone could see the horrible sores, boils, and skin rashes that have afflicted five of his close friends, vic-

tims of an epidemic of drug-resistant staph that is spreading among gay men in large urban areas.

"The most disturbing thing is, each friend who has come down with it has reported that their doctors are shocked at how many people have been coming in," Davis says. From his perspective, the epidemic of the highly contagious methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA, which spreads through skin-to-skin contact and manifests itself in painful, deep abscesses, promises to get much worse before it gets any better.

Since the outbreak of the typically nonfatal bacteria surfaced in Los Angeles last fall, it has spread to nearly every major city in the country. It has

been been thought to be spreading primarily through gay men with multiple sex partners. But with summer's gay pride season and the accompanying circuit parties quickly approaching, health experts warn that there will be a lot of gay men, mostly unaware of the epidemic, who will nonetheless be spreading the disease as they press their flesh against one another.

But bumping and grinding on a dance floor or in a bathroom isn't the only way to catch MRSA. Jack, an HIV-positive gay man who asked to remain anonymous, says he doesn't go to circuit parties or sex clubs and that he doesn't know how he caught the staph infection. In fact, he didn't know any-

THE PEOPLE DEPICTED ARE MODELS AND NOT REAL ILLUSTRATIVE PURPOSES ONLY.

thing was wrong until he went to his dermatologist for what he thought was an ingrown hair under his arm. "I was lucky that I have insurance," he says. "If I didn't, I probably wouldn't have gone in, and it would have gotten nasty." Jack says he also might have confused the infection with the rash he and other people with HIV sometimes get when they take steroids as part of their treatment.

Jack adds that like Davis, he has watched close friends suffer from MRSA. One who thought he was rid of an infection in the groin area "caught it again," he says. "He was doing everything [in addition to taking medication]. He was washing his clothes, using antibacterial soap."

Infection with the vigorous and persistent bacteria often leads to a laborious daily struggle to overcome it, says Gary Cohan, a Beverly Hills physician with many gay male patients. Insurance carriers won't pay for the strongest and newest forms of antibiotics until other, less expensive options have been tried, he says. Some people have to be hospitalized to receive intravenous medications, and most have to take one or more forms of oral medication while applying a topical ointment and washing themselves thoroughly several times a day. Some people have had to have surgery to remove dead skin, Cohan says.

And the situation is only compounded by the price tag on Zyxon, the drug of last resort to battle this strain of staph: about \$1,500 without insurance. "My greatest concern is that \$1,500 would be really financially devastating to me," Davis says.

As was the case with AIDS, a buzz is germinating among gay men just as the situation is heating up, Cohan says. "People are being much more careful about going into a steam room and sitting in someone else's puddle," he says.

And as when AIDS first became widespread, Davis says, the visibility of the illness might encourage more people to take steps to avoid infection. "Even the most irresponsible gay guy is not going to put himself in a situation where he can be seen [with a rash]," he says. "In a weird way, that's good news." ■

Caldwell also writes for Frontiers Newsmagazine.

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