Beyond Condoms: Introduction

June 1, 1999 By Walter Armstrong

The marriage of gay men and condoms is a tormented one.

Over the past 16 years we've invested those disposable packs of hardened rubber with so many fantasies and fears that the apparently simple act of putting a condom on a penis can now seem as hopeless as trying to catch the wind in a net. How do we love/hate them? Let me count the ways.

First, the fact that a measly 0.7 millimeters of latex means the difference between life and death can make existence seem absurd. But that's nothing compared to the moral mandate that neither romance nor testosterone nor substance use nor barebacking trend shall stay us from our appointed rounds of a rubber every time, a trick that not even the best little boy in the world could manage. And then there's the minor matter of homophobia, which makes "GAY=AIDS" so insidiously compelling to our collective unconscious. Not to mention that having a dick up our ass seems, at least at moments, definitely worth dying for. Hey, that's a big load to lay on a buddy.

The gay men who invented safe sex in pre-HIV 1983 knew that a sudden mass conversion to condoms in a culture that prized promiscuity wouldn't be easy. But what started as a shotgun wedding led to one of the biggest public heath successes ever. By 1989, at the height of "safe sex is hot sex," condoms were *the* symbol of community pride. Whether or not we actually used them for fucking, we certainly flashed them as fashion accessories—dangling from ears or pinned to jackets with pink triangles and "SILENCE=DEATH" buttons. They were everywhere—in bars and clubs, at demos and parades, even on Sen. Jesse Helms' house, thanks to TAG—and then, as if the crisis was over, they weren't. Condoms no longer fell from the sky (or GMHC).

Was it when we started paying for condoms out of our own pockets that we at last took the liberty of complaining about the other costs—how they compromise pleasure, intimacy and transcendence? Soon we no longer reached for our gun when our best friend dared to confess that *last weekend I had unsafe sex*. More likely we admitted I *did too*. HIV prevention was energized by the new honesty, and yet infections kept mounting. Now flash-forward to last winter, when a group of young gay men in Los Angeles produced and distributed booklets headlined "Stop Condom Nazis," with the take-home message that "raw sex is real sex" and that prevention is propaganda and, for example, the CDC's estimate that one in 60 acts of barebacking leads to infection is not only too high but suggests a risk worth taking.

You could call this rhetoric that reflects a generation gap, or AIDS activism for the new millennium, or just plain stupid. But however distorted it looks right now, the dream of “beyond condoms”—whether in the form of rectal microbicides or a new culture of gay male health—comes to us like rain in a long dry season. In the following pages, activists Richard Elovich and Michael Scarce argue that our marriage to lifesaving latex can be saved if we free our minds from condomania. How? It starts with talking and listening to one another about what sex means to us. It includes advocating for butt research and taking responsibility for our desires. It repeats what Michael Callen told us 16 years ago about how to have sex in an epidemic: “Maybe affection is our best protection against infection.” We’re still learning that one.

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