Do Ask, Do Tell

Take the Sean O. Strub challenge: Come out, come out, whatever your status—at work and in bed.

January 1, 2000 By Sean Strub

In the past few years, the debate over HIV prevention strategies has intensified but remained frustratingly stagnant. New ideas get shot down even before they can be tested; meantime, research proves that the condom code and other old techniques are failing. The result: more new infections. And while there are as many causes of unsafe sex as there are acts, one thing is clear: Many newly infected people say they had assumed their partner was HIV negative. Somehow, the '80s mantra—"assume every partner is positive and always use a condom"—has, in practice, become "assume your partner's status is the same as yours and hope for the best."

So I was excited to hear about a campaign unveiled last October by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation (SFAF) that specifically targets this assumption-making among gay men (see "Eye of the Beholder"). Based on research by the University of California's Center for AIDS Prevention Studies, the ads aim to educate both positive and negative gay men that these assumptions can turn around and bite them in the ass.

I say we go further. Yes, HIVers need to send a message to others *not to fear asking* our HIV status before having sex with us—we can deal with it. And yes, we also need to be bigger than the small-minded rejection that often confronts us when we disclose—it comes not from hate, but from ignorance and insecurity. With all the crap this disease has dealt us, surely we can handle the jackasses who won't have safe sex with someone they know is positive but will turn around and have unsafe sex with a partner they assume is negative. Do we really want to be intimate with that person anyway?

To bridge this painful gap and to lighten the burden of full disclosure on HIVers, let's all—positive, negative, untested or unsure—put our shoulder to the wheel. Word reclamation is a unifying part of many liberation movements. Let's steal President Clinton's insidious "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy for gays in the military and make it a "Do Ask, Do Tell" policy for all sexually active people, especially gay men.

But asking and telling isn't just "OK"—in most cases, it's better than not asking and not telling. Playing the morality card may tick off a lot of people, but I truly believe that disclosing is morally the right thing to do. We must stop having sex in ignorance and denial of the multitude of diseases

passed back and forth. There are sex venues where few tell and fewer ask—back rooms, anonymous encounters, group scenes—and that isn't likely to change. But when meeting partners in the bars, on the Net, through phone sex, we need to make asking and telling as important as having condoms and lube on hand.

And let's take "Do Ask, Do Tell" to the next level: public gatherings. Support clubs and bars that sponsor "positive nights." I like the idea of social events where people are given colored stickers at the door: red means you're positive, green means you're negative (at least you think you are) and yellow means you don't know or don't want to tell. This eliminates the awkwardness of verbal disclosure.

I'm not naive. The world remains a remarkably hostile place, and coming out can still jeopardize employment, housing, physical safety, child custody and more. But for those with the strength and privilege, disclosure is a contribution to the entire community. As some state legislatures make criminals of HIVers who have sex without disclosing, society "protects" the HIV negative by punishing the HIV positive. The more we disclose, the stronger we are to combat bigotry.

Sadly, too many consider coming out with HIV as a transgressive rather than empowering act. Even our own community is uncomfortable with those who make a public spectacle of their HIV status. I remember how Michael Callen was attacked for supposedly using his public disclosure to advance his singing career. How hateful is that? Yet the fact is, many of us, when we stop worrying about who knows we have HIV, find a freedom that releases natural talents. But when we publicize *why* this has happened, we are often dismissed as opportunists or media whores.

Imagine if everyone who's ever had an STD came out at once. Presidents and priests, parents and teachers…the millions who were treated for an STD while shamefully clinging to their secret, as if they were the only one.

So let's make "Do Ask, Do Tell" HIV prevention's new mantra. And to those who charge me with valorizing, even glamorizing, HIV, I say we don't need your shame. We can honor honesty without denying that having HIV is not desirable. Nondisclosure may remain an absolute right, but it is, in the end, a selfish one.

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