# Editor’s Letter

Occupational Hazard?

December 1, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

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I remember the panic and the media frenzy around the April 2004 announcement that straight (and now former) porn star Darren James had tested positive for HIV. The adult film industry was shut down for 60 days while other actors got tested to determine the extent of the epidemic.

Recently, I got a call from one of James’s friends who said that James was ready to talk about what happened. Thinking back, I now see that his personal testimony was conspicuously absent from the media coverage. Just after his diagnosis—in part because his HIV status had been blasted around the world before he had a chance to face it himself, and before he had the opportunity to tell anyone close to him—James tried to take his own life. Which is why in all the coverage around the incident, we never heard from James. He was too emotionally and physically incapacitated to respond.

James had contracted HIV between two of his regularly scheduled PCR-DNA HIV tests (the industry requires that actors produce negative results in order to keep working); the test can detect whether someone has contracted HIV in as little as 72 hours after exposure. James voluntarily got tested every three weeks (one week earlier than the industry standard). James worked in the adult film industry for seven years, and until that fateful day, he had remained HIV-free. James never filmed a scene after discovering he was positive—it was not his intention to pass the virus on to others.

Testing protects people—to a point. Just ask the Adult Industry Medical Healthcare Foundation (AIM)—the organization responsible for testing all porn performers for HIV, gonorrhea and chlamydia and for enforcing the industry’s self-imposed testing regulations. Unquestionably, AIM has made a positive impact on keeping people HIV negative. However, due to the nature of HIV infection, it’s possible that someone may become HIV positive in between tests and spread the virus unwittingly. Given that it’s impossible to police what adult film actors do off-set, the system should be changed to accommodate the fact that actors will have sex with people of unknown status and that testing, even every 30 days, is not a sufficient safety net.

James was the victim of an industry with a flawed system of protection for its workers. He followed industry regulations to a T. Yet, those regulations failed to protect him. The question I want answered is: Why, after what happened to James and others, did the multibillion dollar adult

pornographic industry fail to reassess its safeguards? The answer, I'm afraid, was that it had a fall guy in James. By implying that he was an exception—a deviant—the industry could justify returning to business as usual. And it wouldn't have to cut its profits by fixing a broken system—even though those changes would save lives.

Whether or not you endorse, or enjoy, porn, it is a legalized industry that makes billions of dollars a year. We expect companies that pay people to fly planes or work on oil rigs or excavate coal mines to ensure the safety of their workers. So why do we not expect the same from those who profit from the skin trade?

Oh yes, and as for condoms? Many actors don't use them because they get paid more to work without them. If viewers were willing to pay more to watch safe sex, the industry might listen. Regardless, it is high time the adult film industry realized the value—both financial and humanitarian—in minimizing the occupational hazards for porn stars. After all, the industry is uniquely positioned to make safe sex sexy.

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