Fear Factor

Spooky new prevention crusades scare Michael Petrelis to death

August 1, 2006 By Michael Petrelis

Before I was diagnosed with HIV, in the mid-'80s, only one thing forced me to protect my partners and avoid sharing sperm: sheer, utter terror. Watching my friends die such quick, pain-racked deaths struck unbridled horror in me and so many of us in AIDS-haunted communities.

In those early days, we all grappled with spooky unknowns. What, precisely, caused the dying—and how could we stop it, treat it, live with it, get the care and respect we deserved? In such a climate, fear of the disease and dying was probably one of the best options to spur behavioral changes that could save our and others' lives.

Now, as AIDS turns 25, so much has improved for those fortunate enough to have survived and have accessed treatment. Why, then, is fear—demeaning, demonizing, repulsive fear—still being used to hype HIV prevention?

Every night, as I walk home from dealing with doctors, diagnostic tests or running to the pharmacy to perfect my ever-changing AIDS cocktail, I must pass an enormous billboard selling fear in San Francisco. Fear of me, Michael Petrelis—and fear of you, whoever you are, wherever you are—and HIV.

A supposed friend of people with HIV, the Stop AIDS Project, recently launched a prevention campaign with an alarmist tagline so creepy it seems ripped from a '50s pod-people double feature:

"Some of the guys you'll cruise tonight have an STD."

Attention, good people of San Francisco! Run for them thar hills and hope those guys don't follow you, swim through the sewers up into your shower and nail ya.

Then there's another billboard, from SFisReady.org. "Ready for the day when we can date without fear of infection?" it asks in large black letters.

This one's a recruiting tool for the HIV Vaccine Trials Network. I support the trials and hope they produce a vaccine, but I absolutely loathe how the ad tries to make us feel bad—that all potential

sex partners might think twice about dating me. That all we homosexuals—“the gays,” as we are often lumped—are diseased and should be handled with tongs.

Frankly, I already do date without fear of infection—fear of infecting others, that is. My commitment to safer sex and preventing HIV is crucial to my mental health. It also does wonders for my self-esteem. Of course, I’m not an idiot: I fully realize that the younger generation, not having seen the horrors of the epidemic’s dawn, might need aggressive education.

But these doomsayers provide no education—say, how to use a condom or which activities are riskiest—nor do they tell us where any education might be found. We’re told only to distrust all men we cruise. There’s a difference between taking responsibility for your safety and fearing your partner as intrinsically harmful and just plain bad. It’s also not sex positive in the least, and this is just one example of many other campaigns driven by alarm and subtle panic.

Sometimes I wonder why my heterosexual brothers and sisters complain that there isn’t enough HIV prevention targeted specifically to them—when, if they had to endure the alarmist screeds we endure, some of them might never step outside.

What we need today, for all sexually active people, regardless of our sexual orientation or bedroom activities, are nonemotional campaigns and workshops, stressing level-toned language to deliver safer-sex messages that work.

Let’s rewrite the billboards: “Be concerned about averting HIV and STDs. If you’re at risk, call the health department for more info and consider joining the vaccine trials. Always use condoms or serosort. Embrace and support HIV positive people for all they do in ending the epidemic. Working together, we can end AIDS.”

Catching, isn’t it?

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