Fruit Loops

GMHC flip-flops on names reporting

April 1, 1998 By Becky Minnich

On January 13, AIDS advocates across New York City choked on their cornflakes and spit out their coffee over this *New York Times* front-page headline: “AIDS Group Urges New York to Start Reporting of HIV” followed by the even more shocking “Policy Does Not Oppose Using Names but Suggests Study of Coded Identification.”

Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) rang in the new year by announcing a shift in its long-held opposition to reporting HIV cases to the State Health Department. Currently, New York keeps track only of full-blown AIDS cases. But that no longer satisfies North America’s oldest AIDS service organization (ASO). “Counting only those who are hospitalized reveals yesterday’s epidemic, not today’s,” said GMHC’s Ron Johnson. GMHC’s statement urged the use of coded or unique identification systems, but did not oppose name reporting in HIV surveillance.

“GMHC made a bad move,” said Jason Farrell, executive director of New York City’s Positive Health Project. “HIV prevalence -- not people -- needs to be reported. Fear of name reporting is what’s going to drive the community we serve away from being tested and treated.” He wasn’t the only one with a bone to pick: GMHC’s phone rang off the hook for three days after the story ran. Doug Wirth, president of the New York AIDS Coalition, representing more than 200 ASOs, told the *Times* that PWAs “have responded with sheer disbelief, outrage and demands for GMHC to work with other advocates to clean this mess up.”

Bitterness and bile also blew in from the West Coast. But PWA Mary Lucey, policy analyst with the Los Angeles City AIDS Office, said she wasn’t surprised. “After all, this is the same group that let the Ryan White legislation go through even though it called for mandatory testing of pregnant women,” she said. “If GMHC is going to sell pregnant women down the river, why not all PWAs?”

As tempers flared, GMHC did some fast backpedaling and offered a “clarification” of its position in the *Times*. Johnson drove the point home at a press conference outside the New York AIDS Institute with reps from New York’s biggest ASOs: “Contrary to impressions that some may have, the AIDS community in New York is uniformly opposed to name reporting.” AIDS advocates hope the new consensus sticks.

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