Viewer Discretion

TV's sexiest shows may be an untapped resource in the fight against AIDS.

December 1, 2009 By Trent Straube

The "post-AIDS sexual revolution" is here! It's happening right now, every Tuesday night on the new *Melrose Place.* That's according to the show's executive director Todd Slavkin. When describing the updated series to E! Entertainment, he said: "We feel that there is a current sexual revolution going on. Kind of post-AIDS—where the boundaries are off." Unlike their sexually shackled parents, today's twentysomethings residing in the new Melrose want to explore their wild sides.

Sounds fun! But will those explorations include condoms or real-world consequences? If the "post-AIDS" attitude is any indication, then no. And that's more than irresponsible. It's a wasted opportunity. One of the most underused and overlooked resources in the fight against AIDS is right in front of our eyes: the stories and characters on today's hit television shows.

"It can be especially powerful when [sexual health] messaging is incorporated in a show," explains Victoria Rideout, MA, who studies health and media at the Kaiser Family Foundation. "The advantage is that it's less preachy and in the context of drama and characters you already know and care about." (Not to mention, you can't fast-forward them like commercials.)

Plus, the messages sink in. Kaiser proved this last year when it worked with the writers of *Grey's Anatomy* to create an episode in which an HIV-positive woman discovers she is pregnant and is informed that she has a 98 percent chance of giving birth to a healthy, HIV-negative baby if she takes the proper meds. Polling the show's viewers, researchers found that one week before the show, 15 percent understood the correct risk of mother-to-child transmission. A week after the show, 61 percent remembered the proper risk—which translated to more than 8 million people absorbing the HIV message—and six weeks later, 45 percent had retained the information.

Unfortunately, references on TV to condoms and safe-sex messages seem to be going the way of analog broadcasts. "Among the 20 most highly rated shows for teen viewers, only one in 10 of those with sexual content includes a reference to sexual risks or responsibilities at some point in the episode," found a separate Kaiser study that examined TV programs from 1997 to 2005. And those references were often in passing and incidental.

Additionally, the number of sex scenes on television doubled during the same period, and a total

of one out of every nine shows (excluding news, sports and children's shows) depicted or strongly implied sexual intercourse.

The average 8- to 18-year old watches three hours of television a day, and the average adult watches 5.5 hours a day—that's a lot of sex scenes. And RAND studies have proved that adolescents who were exposed to a high level of sexual content were twice as likely to initiate sex in the next year, compared with peers who watched fewer such shows.

Given that television remains the most popular entertainment media among youths, even a smart fifth-grader could realize that the most direct route to viewers is advertisements and public service announcements (PSAs). But aside from their expense, commercials must be approved by the networks and cable affiliates. (And their logic can sometimes be as head-scratching as an episode of *Lost*.)

The AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) discovered the challenge of delivering safe-sex messages via a PSA when it created a commercial starring Sheryl Lee Ralph, who implored viewers to talk about HIV, practice safe sex and get tested. AHF planned to air the spot during the animated series *Family Guy*—but, according to AHF president Michael Weinstein, Fox rejected the ad because it talked about and showed a condom.

Trojan, the nation's largest condom manufacturer runs into a similar wall. "With restrictions [on TV marketing], we can only reach about 50 to 60 percent of our target audience in a year," says Jim Daniels, Trojan's vice president of marketing. He recounts asking a network lawyer, "Why is it that we can see advertisements for herpes medications, but I can't advertise for the very product that will prevent it?" That network's rationale, Daniels says, was that it's OK to advertise products that diagnose or treat a preexisting condition, but products with preventive claims—especially preventing pregnancy—are not allowed.

Groups like AHF, Kaiser and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy are finding ways to navigate television's rules by creating PSAs and web content directly related to TV shows. And in the case of MTV's *16 and Pregnant*, even helping to create and market an entire program. But more needs to be done. A Trojan study found that 50 percent of Americans between 18 and 34 claim they didn't receive condom education. And according to the CDC, more HIV infections occurred in 2006 among people ages 13 to 29 than any other age group, confirming that HIV is an epidemic primarily of young people.

Imagine how these numbers might change if more advocates focused on embedding safe-sex information in television programs. It could be done in an organic manner that's consistent with and honors the show. After all, *Seinfeld* found a way to talk about condoms and the Sponge—and we're still laughing about it 14 years later. If more programs could follow suit, then maybe one day, when we talk about a post-AIDS world, it won't be as far-fetched as an episode of *Melrose Place*.

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