Media: I Want My HIV

MTV scores again while Sports Illustrated goes down swinging

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Home Delivery

It's well-known that the people now most at risk for HIV transmission -- teenagers and young adults -- tune out authority figures in favor of their peers. That's what makes MTV's September 27 program *Smart Sex* one of the best AIDS prevention shows yet aired. Hosted by hip actor Christian Slater, the hour-long show features 11 young people, gay and straight, talking about their sexual decision-making. That's it. No doctors. No social workers. No "experts" of any kind.

Such effective, real-world programming is nothing new for MTV. So it seems almost churlish to point out where *Smart Sex* made a dumb mistake: The cable channel's show never explains how to use a condom. Ignorance about proper condom use is rampant and deadly.

Another shortfall: The editing sometimes turns *Smart Sex* surprisingly preachy. A self-described "secondary virgin" tells the camera that she was "messing up by having sex -- bottom line." Fortunately, such heavy-handed cuts pale agains the variety of perspectives, including a staggeringly obnoxious 19-year-old man who occasionally puts on a condom "and then when she ain't watching, off it goes."

The show's biggest contribution is that it addresses the psychology of safer sex. Mechanics are the easy part of safer sex. water-based lubricants and careful condom rolling notwithstanding. Things really get dicey during intimate bedroom negotiations, which touch on deeply buried insecurities. In MTV's *Smart Sex*, young people explain *exactly* how they broach and discuss that most difficult of topics, safer sex.

Take Out

Sports Illustrated all but ignored the recent 10,000-athlete Gay Games held in New York City, but the magazine did mention one of the Games' stars, swimming ace Jim Ballard. In its short-story profiles section, "Faces in the Crowd," the September 12 issue of *SI* notes that Ballard broke a world backstroke record in the 35-39 age group. What the tiny profile omitted was the most compelling reason for spotlighting Ballard: This strapping 36-year-old is apparently the first openly HIV positive athlete to set an individual world record in any sport.

Why the omission? “Faces” editor Candace Putnam told *POZ* that only six lines are allotted to each item and that adding Ballard’s HIV status would have made the item too long. “’HIV positive’ has all those capital letters,” Putnam sighed, “and they take up a lot of space.” Uh, OK.

Pick Up

In the September 6 *Advocate*, Torie Osborn almost begs gay men to stop killing each other, as does Michelangelo Signorile in the October issue of Out. Both writers were motivated by a terrifying rise in new infections among gay men. At current rates, more than *half* of gay men now in their 20s will contract HIV. In facing such facts, both columnists urge the gay community to take responsibility for its sexual culture. And both writers draw on personal experience.

Signorile confesses to an incident of unprotected, receptive anal intercourse, candidly retracing the psychological steps that led him to it. This is the story’s best part. Even with a condom, getting fucked has stigma; without one, that’s doubly true. By putting his name on this story, Signorile gives his readers license to talk about their own slip-ups, a first step to avoiding them in the future. And by talking *entre nous*, Signorile gives himself license to lambast gay sexual culture for being shallow and “more oppressive than anything that straight people ever dish up.”

That’s hyperbole, but culture and politics certainly influence how individuals maintain safer sex, which is Osborn’s message. The former head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Osborn ruefully recalls her part in the “de-AIDSing” of lesbian and gay politics. But as with Signorile, Osborn’s error gives her credibility and passion. She implores the lesbian and gay movement to recognize the “terrible” peril posed by new transmissions. “The personal is political,” she writes. “As we fight like hell... for those who are HIV positive, we have to change our community radically so that HIV negative people have enough self-esteem... to want to survive this holocaust.”

À la Carte

Belated congratulations to WGBH, the Boston public television station, for producing *AIDS Research: The Story So Far*. The documentary, which aired in April, is an excellent primer on AIDS science.... *Harper’s* much-discussed essay on AIDS kitsch was frivolous in all senses: The July article was certainly amusing, but given the urgency of the epidemic it also seemed trivial.... The overview of women and AIDS in the September 12 *Playgirl* was easy to miss. That’s a pity, because the article was surprisingly informative and politically pointed.

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