Obitu-Parry

May 1, 1997 By Erik Meers

The obituary page has never been the same since the onset of the AIDS epidemic. This stodgiest of journalistic institutions never knew quite what to do with people who died of this initially unmentionable malady. Now that it has become permissable to discuss, editors still don't know how to handle obituaries of those who die untimely deaths from obscure bacterial infections, yet those families decline to disclose the deceased's HIV status.

A case in point is the death last December of actor Howard Rollins. Rollins, who starred in the movie *Ragtime* and the TV series *Heat of the Night,* had long been rumored to have AIDS. When he died at the age of 46, his family and agents closed ranks and stayed tight-lipped.

It's instructive to examine how the press reported Rollin's cause of death. By and large, the mainstream media leave the naming of the cause of death to the family members. One often reads that a young actor died of "natural causes." The wire services, which are the source for almost all local news coverage in the United States, reported that Rollins died of "complications from cancer."

But what did the more sophisticated news outlets, which were surely aware of the rumor, do? *The New York Times* ran an obit that made reference to its inability to ascertain definitively the cause of death. *Entertainment Weekly*, which arguably has had the best AIDS coverage of any pop-culture mag, explicitly sidestepped the issue: "Rollins, whose cause of death was not disclosed, had denied for six years that he had AIDS."

Without a doubt, the most interesting coverage came from the *New York Post.* The tabloid really did its homework: "Rollins' agent, Rozanne Gates, said he died of a bacterial infection from septic shock due to complications from lymphoma. The actor was diagnosed with the HIV virus [sic], according to Emergency Medical Service records...It was not clear if his death was AIDS-related." The story went on to quote a friend of 20 years: "He said the damn AIDS gets in the way of everything." Interestingly, the *Post* did not scream its AIDS scoop in a headline or cover billing, but this news was undoubtedly read by mainstream magazine editors. Yet oddly, the revelation was picked up by only a few of the major weeklies.

Ironically, Rollins was quite open about his long-standing drug problem. While filming *In the Heat of the Night,* in which he played Det. Virgil Tibbs opposite Carroll O'Connor, Rollins was arrested several times on drug charges. He was finally written off the show in 1993. While he spoke candidly about his battles with cocaine addiction, he continued to vehemently deny rumors he had

AIDS.

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