# Packing Meat, Just Barely

December 1, 2000 By Donald Suggs

It's raining heavily tonight, but that hasn't dampened the spirits of the five men (and one facilitator) assembled in the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Manhattan's Meatpacking District. The purpose of tonight's discussion is to shed new light on barebacking, the controversial practice of gay men deliberately having sexual intercourse without condoms. But as a comment by Michael, a white fiftysomething in an AIDS Ride t-shirt, illustrates—"I don't like to think about those things when I have a hard-on"—you can't always draw a clear line in the sand between these guys and gay men who routinely "slip" or straight men who simply prefer their sex raw.

Still, it's the hope of facilitator Miguel, a 29-year-old Puerto Rican with box braids, that this discussion will help get others involved in his efforts to lobby for gay-friendly research on microbicides, topically applied gels and creams that kill HIV. "The problem is that there's no alternative to condoms," he insists, "not that there's a lack of awareness about safer sex." Until that happens, no one is ready to table the talk about the stigma attached to those who openly engage in "risky" sex.

The only hitch is that while all present are willing to offer a spirited defense of their right to have condomless sex—43-year-old Dennis from Chelsea describes it as a "sexual version of extreme sports"—no one seems to be exercising it, at least not in the devil-may-care fashion that is supposed to dramatically distinguish barebackers' from other men. Forty-nine-year-old Lidell, a sex-club owner from Manhattan, limits himself to barebacking with older, HIV positive men, in environments conducive to discussing the possible consequences of reinfection. "I confine myself to doing it at sex clubs," he says, "because I can talk about it first. You can't do that in a public restroom. There isn't that level of negotiation."

Miguel feels that such anecdotes support his contention that most barebackers already try to practice some form of safer sex and only need better options, like microbicides. But not all approaches to harm reduction are so well thought out. "A lot of guys I sleep with ask me if I have a girlfriend first," says a 51-year-old, also named Michael, wearing jeans and a blue t-shirt. "The perception is that if we're both 'straight,' then it's 'safe' [to be unsafe]." He shrugs, "But maybe that's a Jersey thing."

For Don, a 41-year-old Chinese-American educator who shifts uncomfortably throughout the discussion, what's at issue is not just when and how to dispense with a condom, but the prevailing notions of "responsibility" that underlie the barebacking debate—and their implications for men

who are already HIV positive. “I want to see advances in HIV medications and microbicides,” he says, “but there’s no quick fix for the discrimination that people with HIV already have to face.”

To him, that’s evident in the very language used to discuss barebacking—in tonight’s discussion and in general. “Words like risk taking are judgmental,” he says quietly, “and part of the whole safer-sex agenda. Prevention only talks about how to keep HIV negative men negative, not how to improve positive men’s lives. The assumption is always that anything that keeps you alive longer is better. But some of us don’t want to live in pain—or to always have to think about condoms. Quality of life is important too, not just
quantity of life.”

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