Paint by Numbers

January 1, 2001 By Katie Szymanski

The headlines blared and sirens sounded: San Francisco's Department of Public Health reported in June a near-tripling of new HIV cases to 900, a rate that department official Willi McFarland, in a pointedly topical sound-bite, called a "sub-Saharan African" level of transmission. Breaking stories from *ABC News* to *The New York Times* warned that this jump -- particularly when coupled with leaks about a rectal gonorrhea report showing a high infection rate among gay men, generally thought to indicate a high prevalence of unsafe sex -- would soon be seen in other cities.

But none of the major media outlets stuck around for a follow-up to the "Oh no, Homos." The day after the first report, McFarland retracted the 900-case estimate and called his sound-bite "unfortunate." The rectal gonorrhea report was inexplicably omitted from the city's monthly STD report. A health department report released in September placed the number of newly HIV positive between 500 and 600. Critics pointed out that the number of gay men in the city had increased, which made the rate change markedly less "sub-Saharan" (one in four). And when the gonorrhea figures finally surfaced, they actually showed a decrease in the per capita rate, though the raw number of cases had gone up.

"The damage had already been done," said city supervisor Tom Ammiano. "It's unfortunate that through all of this, gay men have really been the victims."

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