Roamin’ Holiday

The queen of safer sex strays from the crown (and the glove)

February 1, 1997 By River Huston

I’m the queen of safer sex. But things happen. The first chink in my *amour* for absolute “safety” was at the National Skills Building Conference in California this past year.

I was languishing in another Basic Science and HIV Treatment break-out session. So I tried flirting with the only straight man in the room, the presenter. Pocket protector, shock of hair; you know the type.

He was talking about how researchers were investigating whether one strain of HIV could act as an antibody to another. Of course, the sexual ramifications of this immediately came to mind: I raised my hand and asked: If this were so, could HIV positive people have unsafe sex with one another as a kind of therapy? Well, talk about opening a can of worms. This scientist claimed there had been no studies on that theory. He compared a person with HIV to an ocean; one person with HIV ejaculating inside another had the effect of pouring a glass of wine into said ocean.

Murmuring erupted. The presenter quickly added that no studies have proved or disproved this theory. He reminded us that HIV positive people can infect each other with other sexually transmitted diseases.

I tucked this information away. Then, on my most recent lecture tour, I unearthed one of the men I’d met through the personals. I didn’t go there with any intentions (*yeah, right*), I just thought we were going to have dinner (*puhleese*). I told him about this theory and was surprised to find out that even though he had not languished in a Basic Science break-out session, he felt the whole reinfection theory was caca.

Neither of us had had unsafe sex since our diagnosis -- until that night. We barely made it home dressed. I forgot how much I like that gooey, viscous stuff. Then I felt immediately guilty, then afraid. *What had I been thinking? Was it worth it? What if I get sick?* I justified: He does have 1,200 T-cells and has been infected for 10 years. If that scientist was right, maybe he just shot a cure inside me. I wanted more.

Talking to my girlfriends, I found that many HIV positive couples *don’t* practice safe sex unless one partner is sick. I discovered that many HIV positive women who were married or in a long-term monogamous relationship with HIV negative men were also having unsafe sex. The couples felt

that as long as she didn’t have her period and he had no cuts on his penis, the two viral particles per 20 droplets of vaginal secretion did not put the man at high risk. And so far, no seroconversions.

My findings made me nervous. My great fear of infecting another person had propelled me into believing in safe sex *all the time*. Another chink in my armor.

The final crack that led me to the brink of an unsafe sex experience with an HIV negative guy happened at the New Jersey Women and HIV Conference. I was languishing in the Women-Controlled Barrier Method break-out session. The presenter had just showed us the female condom. I have tried this contraption. After you have finally gotten the thing inserted, you don’t want sex, you want a Valium.

Then she brought out a VCF shield, a little piece of plastic inserted deeply into the vagina. It dissolves and coats the vaginal canal with nonoxynol-9. She explained that nonoxynol-9 had gotten a bad rap because of a study done in Nairobi. Researchers had given 1,000 mg of nonoxynol-9 to prostitutes to prevent transmission. Nonoxynol-9 can be an irritant to the vaginal wall, thereby increasing ports of entry for the virus. And the women were having sex with 20-30 men a day. Between customers they washed up with a strong lye-based soap. Surprise: This study showed nonoxynol-9 use *increased* transmission.

Researchers in a Malawi study used only 100 mg of nonoxynol-9. Seroconversion occurred in 90 percent fewer women. (The New York Department of Health recommends 100-150 mg.) The deciding blow to my defenses had been dealt.

So I bought a box of VCF shields and went to see my HIV negative lover. He had been begging for unsafe sex for three years. We did it. Well, almost. Right at the moment of penetration, I realized I couldn’t live with this. I wasn’t turned on anymore. And I’m glad I stopped. The anxiety could not possibly have been worth the pleasure. Call me the queen again!

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