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Young girls with HIV--put the blame at Donna Shalala's cold feet

May 1, 1997 By Sean Strub

If I were the parent of a sexually active teenage girl, I would be scared to deatha nd mad as hell at Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala

Why? Because her failure to lift the ban on federal funding of needle-exchange programs has caused thousands of young women (girls, really) to acquire HIV from older, injection-drug-using male partners.

That's the underlying cause of the tremendous increase in HIV among girls 13 to 20. Most of these can be linked to dirty needles and the cold feet of Donna Shalala.

From this day forward, *POZ* will keep a running tally of these "Shalala Infections" until Donna Do-nothing lifts the ban on federal funding for needle exchange.

Her failure to do so will stand, historically, as an act of genocidal neglect. Elizabeth Taylor, last summer at the International AIDS Conference in Vancouver, called the failure to fund needle exchange "a measured act of premeditated murder." Even *The New York Times,* in a lead editorial, urged the administration to find the political guts to fund needle exchange.

Secretary Shalala's record on this issue is pathetic, if not criminal. First she suppressed a pair of CDC reports urging her to lift the ban. Then she ignited an international firestorm of criticism from scientists, when she lied about research findings, claiming there was "a controversy over" whether needle exchange reduces new infections or increases use of illegal drugs. (In fact, there is unprecedented unanimity among experts on these two points.)

Then Shalala lied about whether she had the authority to lift the ban, when Congress explicitly granted her authority to release designated federal funds once these two points of science had been clearly demonstrated.

A few weeks ago, Shalala issued her long-postponed report to Congress finding that needle-exchange programs can be "effective"--yet incredibly, she still refused to lift the ban.

Shalala's inner circle would have us believe that lifting the ban would result in Congress

immediately overturning her action. Even the alphabet soup of AIDS-involved groups, including NAPWA, AAC, NMAC and HRC have abdicated any leadership role on needle exchange, quietly downplaying the issue as “too controversial.” (AmFAR, specifcally Mathile Krim and Jane Silver, and local ACT UP chapters are the notable exceptions.)

Others disagree and claim congressional support for needle exchange is far broader than assumed and only needs leadership from Shalala or the Infecter-in-Chief, Bill Clinton.

Either way, Shalala’s failure to provide federal funds for needle exchange programs betrays a grotesquely cruel lack of morality of which she ought be ashamed. That’s the real controversy.

Shalala granted former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders an OK to lift the ban, but then quickly rescinded it after the Republicans swept the 1994 congressional elections. Elders reently commented about the difference between “commitment” and “concern” when it comes to AIDS. There is no compromise on commitment, she said, while concern leaves a lot of leeway.

Secretary Shalala is perhaps concerned. But her commitment is to her own cowardly protection of a President terrified of taking any action that could be used as evidence he is soft on drugs--even if the price of that cowardice is the infection of tens of thousands.

How about Shalala’s subordinates and supporters? Have they lobbied Secretary Shalala, in writing, to lift the ban? Are they willing to accept the responsibility that their silence today truly means death tomorrow for thousands? Or are they the “good soldiers,” willing to overlok the impact of their actions...and their silence?

Maybe it will be a class-action lawsuit, maybe a war crimes tribunal or perhaps the scrutiny of an electorate with a long memory. But someday former HHS Undersecretary Phil Lee, Deputy Secretary Kevin Thurm, press secretary Victor Zonana, Special Assistant Sarah Kovner, AIDS Council Chair Scott Hitt, AIDS policy staffers Patsy Flemming, Kristine Gebbie and Jeff Levi, Shalala walker Tom Goodwin and golf partner Hilary Rosen will be asked what pressure they exerted.

Did they *really* go to the mat on this issue with Shalala? If so, let’s hear it. We’ll keep *POZ* readers updated about the difference between those who are “concerned” and those who are “committed.”

For those who haven’t spoken up, I urge you to do so immediately. Save your honor--and your place in history--while you can. In the process, you can also save lives.

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