School for Scandal

Lambda teaches officials a lesson

March 1, 1997 By Walter Armstrong and Ronnilyn Pustil

AIDS summer school will be standing-room only this year. Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, which brought the nation's first AIDS discrimination lawsuit in 1983, issued its 1996 report card grading public officials and organizations on their response to AIDS. The results aren't pretty. "History will judge those who have failed to help those living with HIV," Lambda Executive Director Kevin Cathcarty said. "But the epidemic cannot wait, so with this AIDS report card, we are judging them now."

The foremost flunkee is Donna Shalala, head of Health and Human Services, who gets an F for failing to 1) lift the ban on federal funds for needle exchange; 2) revise outdated restrictions on HIV positive health care workers; 3) ensure Medicaid managed-care programs meet the needs of PWAs. Other notable losers: The Department of Justice (C-), for pressing for the criminal prosecution of physician-assisted suicide; and Chicago public schools (F), for mandatory testing of all employees. Both the Democratic and Republican partied failed for pretending there's no epidemic.

A new face topped the A list: Loretta Sanchez, who boldly advocated the civil rights of PWAs in edging out hatemonger Robert Dornan in a California rep race. An Secretary of Defense William Perry got an I, for incomplete, for his flip-flop on mean-spirited Dornan measures: He was against the expulsion of military servicemembers who have HIV, but for giving the boot to gay ones.

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