Sex

Oral sex just ain't what it used to be

June 1, 1994 By David Feinberg

It had been a long time since I had spent an entire afternoon dedicated to oral sex. It was Sunday. My only viable alternative was seeing *Babyface* at the Film Forum. With glee and sheer abandon I took the #1 uptown to nosebleed territory and found myself at the Miller Theatre of Columbia University. Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and the Columbia Gay Health Advocacy Project have sponsored a community discussion on "Oral Sex and Possible HIV Transmission."

I came armed with a bottle of Spa water, a baggy filled with leftover tortilla chips from last night's My-Ex-Finally-Moved-Out party and remnants of the Sunday *New York Times* for he inevitable slow parts.

At the very least I was expecting a fascinating tearoom, I mean, snack breaks. Would the symposium include a section on technique? I was hoping for demonstrations and more than willing to host a workshop in my swank gay bachelor pad. Alas! After two hours of scientific data regarding the mechanics of transmission of HIV, the biology and virology of mucous membranes, the viral content of pre-ejaculatory fluid, I was tempted to solder my button-fly jeans permanently after the next time I urinated; I doubted I would ever be able to hold my member again without wearing two sets of latex gloves. The information wasn't particularly damning; it was, however, powerfully de-eroticizing in clinical detail.

One scientist, discussing the difficulties of culturing pre-ejaculatory fluid, mentioned its extreme viscosity. He claimed certain samples can stretch up to several feet. This, I knew from personal experience and my extensive videographic research. I would posit the popular penchant for prodigious penises to be somehow related to the phenomenon of autoerotic asphyxiation. Three years ago I learned two significant lessons from a highly inadequate boyfriend (inadequate, not due to his endowment, but because he already had a boyfriend): 1. It is possible to forget your gag response; and 2. Never attempt to suck someone off within twenty minutes of ingesting a slice of pizza (Sicilian or Neapolitan).

Once again a brave and valiant lesbian saved the day as she discussed how the fellatio paradigm didn't necessarily apply to oral sex betwee women. As she listed what William James refers to as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (licking, sucking, munching, biting, lapping, tonguing, thrusting, swirling, swallowing, gargling, spitting, gumming and so on), the male members of the

panel turned a whiter shade of pale. One was on the verge of fainting. GMHC's Lesbian AIDS Project has an apt acronym: LAP.

The bottom line was: Yes, it happens. Anecdotally, people have become HIV positive through oral sex. Anal sex is a far more efficient method of transmitting the virus. In the early years of the epidemic, the prevalence of unprotected anal sex masked whatever transmission was occuring through oral sex. Now as more and more people are using condoms with anal sex, or simply refraining from it, transmission through oral sex which was hidden is now apparent.

My gut reaction was, "Kill the messenger! Kill the messenger!" With an automatic rifle and enough ammo I could easily rub out the entire panel of experts and specialists. Unfortunately, during the question and answer period, the friends I was sitting next to took the mike and contended that he himself had become HIV-infected from oral sex at that very campus! Earlier in the afternoon, he had showed me his ad in *The Body Positive*. I only wanted to know so I wouldn't inadvertently respond to his ad. I recalled with shame that day in 1983 on Jones Beach when I passed a friend a copy of the *Native*, forgetting I had circled several ads.

I left unsatisfied. I wanted concrete figures and guidelines. I wanted to be able to measure on-site the probability of transmission using calipers and LCD metric devices. I wanted someone to definitely say that "data consistently suggests the per partner infectivity is about 1 percent," in which case, I would stop after 99 partners. Someone in fact did make this statement during the course of the afternoon, although I would hesitate to refer to it as any more than a preliminary hypothesis. But the point is moot. I'm already positive. I'm left with the possibility that I might have seroconverted even if I hadn't had unprotected anal sex on June 3, 1982 at 27 West 11th Street, Apartment 10, New York City.

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