Syph ’N’ Spin

December 1, 1999 By Shana Naomi Krochmal

A slow-news end of summer had mainstream newspapers falling back on old habits to make new headlines. Most sensational was the story of the“syphilis fraternity”—seven gay men who tested positive for the STDafter frequenting SFM4M (San Francisco Men for Men), an America Online (AOL) chat room used by Bay Area boys to arrange get-togethers. What made this newest skirmish in the epidemic’s familiar public health–vs.–personal freedom war a first was that it took place on the Internet, pitting public health against the right to privacy.

The AOL members’ anonymity—and the discomfort of most media when faced with the unregulated underbelly of web culture—proved a highly flammable mix. One of the men in the virtual bathhouse, gasped *USA Today*,“is known to have exposed 47 partners [to syphilis].” The late-breaking fact that as many as five of the men had HIV only added icing to the cake. The Syphilis Seven (and their 99 total possible infectees) loomedas a health crisis *because* of their anonymity, and AOL was put through the ethics wringer for protecting the men’s identities.

That’s when volunteers from PlanetOut, a gay-focused website, dropped in on SFM4M to provide sex education and referrals to men known only by their user names. AOL—one of PlanetOut’s owners—had requested the intervention, a first for the news-and-entertainment company, though the prevention information was identical to what street outreach programs have been dispensing for years.

For those who dreamed that cluster-study panic went the way of Patient Zero, this event was a rude awakening. Reporters seized on the “first disease cluster in cyberspace” as a lead. It was the adult version of kiddie-porn Internet warnings: Try looking for love—let alone sex with strangers—on the dark, sticky web, and you can count on some nasty virus as punishment.

Although big cities from New York to San Francisco had already announced an up--surge in syphilis infections, the total cases remained tiny (the CDC reported 46 cases during the first half of 1998). Adding fuel to the fire was the simultaneous release of a University of California at San Francisco study in which a quarter of the gay male participants reported unprotected anal sex with a partner of the opposite or unknown status. With the AOL story’s anecdotal evidence sharing column space with the UCSF data, each only confirmed the other’s most sinister point: The gays—HIV positive, reckless and predatory—are at it again, and now they’re at large in cyperspace.

The demonization of gay sex never left mainstream media, even in papers that use “PWA” instead of “AIDS victim,” but as the dog days of August dragged to a close, disease-carrying insects in the

Northeast took syph’s place at the top of the hour. Stay tuned for the next horror-headline comeback: “First case of mosquito-to-human HIV transmission!"

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Syph-N-Spin-12202-7231