The Body Politic

Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura wrestles with AIDS and pins the feds to the mat in a chat with Doug Ireland.

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He's probably seen more blood—real and fake—than any other politician in the country. Thus it's perhaps not all that surprising that Minnesota's Gov. Jesse "The Body" Ventura—the flamboyant ex-wrestler and the Reform Party's most prominent elected official—is a strong supporter of explicit HIV-prevention efforts in the public schools. In an exclusive interview with *POZ*—the governor's first on AIDS issues since taking office in January 1999—Ventura said, "I'm a great believer in parenting, which is the first line in sex education. But not all parents parent. Many children won't get [adequate sex ed] if it's not taught in school."

The self-described "social libertarian" with the libertine past—he's written about his sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll youth in his autobiography—said, "We must educate our children because if they're old enough to be capable of catching AIDS, they're old enough to learn about it." Ventura also said that "we live in the real world," and therefore school condom distribution is "just common sense."

So has Ventura put his money where his mouth is? First the facts: Minnesota has one of the lowest HIV-infection rates in the country, with some 6,200 cases reported since the beginning of the epidemic. One reason the state's HIV stats are relatively low is that, since 1988, Minnesota has had a law mandating sex and AIDS education in public middle and high schools. Implementation of the law, however, varies widely from school district to school district, and the state's youth are now being hit disproportionately hard: In 1998, 40 percent of new infections were among those in their teens and 20s, an increase from 30 percent in the early '90s. That's why the state's largest AIDS service organization, the Minnesota AIDS Project (MAP), has proposed a $10 million supplemental appropriation to reinforce the prevention infrastructure at the school level for all sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS.

AIDS advocates complain that the governor has so far failed to support this initiative, even though the state this fall reported a $1.4 billion surplus. "All we're asking for is one-half of one-half of one-half percent of the surplus," MAP's policy director Bob Tracy said. Asked about this, Ventura said it's "a problem of timing," pointing to the fact that the state has a biennial budget. "I don't like supplemental appropriations," he said. "It's not that things like AIDS aren't important—it's just that if I do it for one thing I have to do it for another." But he promised to consider the request in his next budget proposal, which would take effect in 2001, and acknowledged that "if we're not

getting the word out to young people [about AIDS], then we're wrong."

Ventura flayed Congress' and the Clinton administration's draconian opposition to medical marijuana, as well as the administration's threats to use federal licensing laws to prosecute doctors who prescribe it—a policy Ventura calls "utterly ridiculous." He argued, "This should be up to the states, and if a state has decided to allow medical marijuana, the federal government should be ashamed to forbid it. Who the hell are they to tell people with AIDS or cancer what to take—they should take anything they damn well want to!"

The health and social-services commissioners appointed by Ventura get high marks from most AIDS groups—MAP's Tracy describes them as "extremely knowledgeable and sympathetic"—and just after his 1998 election Ventura became the first Minnesota chief executive to participate in a World AIDS Day event. But since then, activists say they've been unable to get a meeting with him, and he ducked World AIDS Day last year. Ventura blames this on a hectic schedule—"I turn down 19 out of 20 requests"—and says he'll meet with AIDS groups in the future. (Indeed, on the December morning of his *POZ* interview, MAP got a call from Ventura's chief of staff promising a meeting.)

Ventura clearly has yet to fully turn his attention to AIDS issues, and his fiscal conservatism is an obstacle to increased AIDS funding. But his iconoclastic politics make him a potential ally, not an enemy. If we can educate Ventura on AIDS and he continues his blunt speaking, he could become a powerful voice on our behalf. At the very least, he should be able to knock some heads around without much prodding.

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