To the Editor

May 1, 1999

My stomach turned in disgust and my T-cells probably dropped due to the stress of being so upset over your bareback articles (“They Shoot Barebackers, Don’t They?” and “A Ride on the Wild Side,” February 1999). For 14 years I’ve lived with HIV, and excuse me if I missed the “spiritual connection” while contracting this virus. How spiritually invigorating to have to consume 36 pills a day for the rest of my life. And how intimate I am with my $28,000-a-year medical bills! Not to mention the “XTREME” side effects that go along with the drugs. This might be a good time to start Gay Men’s Fools Crisis!

Ted Pecora
New York City

POZ provided a crucial public service by courageously supporting a dialogue on barebacking. The dispute around this issue cannot be described as “for or against” barebacking. Rather, it is a dispute about the parameters of the discussion: Are we willing to support full, honest exploration of this issue, or are we going to shriek and run when a potent, scary topic is raised?

One of the most common refrains that AIDS prevention workers hear is “What are the symptoms of AIDS?” Going by the writing I find in this and every issue of *POZ*, the symptoms of AIDS are veracity and guts.

Julie Boler
Raleigh, North Carolina

My shortlist of words to describe how I felt about your barebacking cover feature: *enraged, repulsed, hurt, despairing*. First, the cover glamorized barebacking by splaying the handsome but undoubtedly disturbed Tony Valenzuela on the back of a horse. His coy smile and come-hither repose clearly suggested that the story was going to validate this pathological behavior. The word *bareback* was even designed with a bold, strident typeface.

In his S.O.S., Sean Strub tried to validate this feature with logic so ill-conceived that it was laughable. How can he make a mockery of those we have lost to this disease? How dare he presume that Michael Callen would condone barebacking? Anyone who knew Callen knows he would have vehemently condemned this behavior. He was a safer-sex activist, not a safer-unsafe-sex one.

And then the feature. Here's the deal: A negative man who wants the "bug" needs psychiatric help since he is clearly suicidal; the positive man who gives someone his "gift" also needs help, but should be arrested first, for he is homicidal.

I need a cure, and your article has decreased my chances. At a time when there is enough AIDS complacency, you have undermined the efforts of all who work so hard at fundraising.

I now find myself expressing the same rhetoric of the Christian Right: I condemn this lifestyle, for it is a choice. Only I feel more rage. I hate the sin *and* the sinner.

Mitchell A. Chuich
New York City

Many of us who have "natural" sex do so because we find unique satisfaction, completion and intimacy in sharing our essence this way. Tony Valenzuela, for all his charm, does neither us nor himself a favor by stepping into the role of poster boy for unbridled barebacking. And the concept of a "barebacking convention" with anonymous unprotected sex encounters makes me wonder: If you don't care about your partner as a human or a lover, why would you want to carry his semen inside you or plant your seed in him? While I understand the erotic value of a hot cum shot, I don't see it as a cure for the loneliness and isolation many gay men feel, even in a room full of churning testicles.

Kevin Martin
Los Angeles

The barebacking phenomenon has shown that people have grown resistant to prevailing prevention strategies. Tony Valenzuela is to be congratulated for his openness about his sexual practices, for it will hopefully spark the kind of discussion necessary to enlarge current HIV prevention efforts. He is correct when he says that such efforts have partly lost touch with those they set out to reach.

However, nowhere in Stephen Gendin's rather naive article does Valenzuela provide a cogent explanation for why he chooses to deliberately put his life in danger by ignoring safer-sex practices, except to cite reasons of sexual pleasure. He defines his code of sexual ethics simply by claiming that "the risk for those who top bareback is minimal." Alas, such thinking is as thin as the latex he eschews. It amounts to nothing less than denial posing as rationalization.

Gay men need more than this to help us navigate the tricky waters of sexual fulfillment in these difficult times. If we have internalized taboos about our sexuality, we must break them, not through a fetishization of sexual risk but through a celebration of our bodies rather than their sacrifice.

Eric G. Lehman

New York City

I was saddened to read Tony Valenzuela's description of bareback sex as a "spiritual" experience. His misplacement of spiritual value on the act of sex only shows the magnitude of his low self-esteem and the depth of his misunderstanding of the meaning of spirituality. His failure to see beyond the next 10 or 15 years when beauty fades and AIDS becomes a daily physical and financial battle is indicative of the mentality behind the increasing appeal of bareback sex. This mentality is only perpetuated by the luxuriously romantic and sexy photos of Valenzuela in *POZ*.

Edward Smith
Westport, Connecticut

I've been living with HIV for 15 years, am a trainer and educator for the Maryland department of health mental hygiene AIDS administration and an AIDS activist. Barebacking is not something new in the smorgasbord of sexuality, but open and honest discussion of it certainly is. It is only through such discussion that we can ever hope to educate ourselves about the relative levels of risk we are willing to place ourselves in.

Chris Camp
Via the Internet

I do the job of AIDS educator that so many flippantly attack. I am my most challenging client, for the education I provide is also my own. Through the experiences of the many men I work with, I grow to understand the deeper complexities of my own challenge to stay negative. I see how my use of drugs and alcohol has allowed me to dull my resistance, allowing men to "just put it in a bit." Before long the quick poke becomes a roar of passion, energy and light. With every thrust I feel my brain expand as I perform the act so basic to my being as a gay man. Intercourse was never supposed to involve a condom.

Ironically, it wasn't until I moved away from the temptations of the big city to a town on an island that I had my first bareback experiences—during my current tenure as a community AIDS educator. I recall the sheer joy of the moment, the death-defying plunge into unprotected sex which came with the price of sadness and regret as I later lay alone on the mattress.

If the "community" of gay men stopped blaming us (and themselves) for the guilt of wanting a man to cum in their ass, we could work together to encourage them to use whatever means to make their own decisions about risk reduction and not feel guilty about it.

Marc Mertens
AIDS Vancouver Island
Victoria, British Columbia

I have been in HIV case management for six years and have worked with well over 200 individuals

infected with this virus. My first response to your barebacking articles is one of incredulousness. It is hard for me to see that after 15 years there are those who actively seek to become infected with HIV. My second response is anger. In one of your articles someone was quoted as saying that barebacking is "the ultimate sharing of intimacy." This is unadulterated bullshit! Barebacking is a conscious irresponsible choice. The disease also affects one's loved ones and community. When the barebacker finally becomes infected—and eventually he will—how will he justify his choice to have condomless sex to those of us called upon to care for him?

To be honest, I do not know if I could work as a case manager for someone who stated that he sought a "gift giver" because he wanted to become infected. It would be difficult, especially in light of all those with whom I have worked who so wish they never had become infected. Why not stick your hand in a fire? Just don't come crying to me asking for help when you get hurt.

Robert M. Taylor
Houston

Tony Valenzuela was my student at the New Pacific Academy. It remains gratifying that he and many other former students of mine continue to carry out the revolutionary implications of "community service and activism" in so many arenas, from inside the Clinton administration and Supreme Court to street-corner needle exchanges to the sets of porn films. Thanks for making a weary has-been activist like me feel some sparkle.

Luke Adams
Via the Internet

I read the articles about barebacking, and I was never so astounded in all of my life. I have been HIV positive for 15 years and I do not understand the concept of people wanting to infect themselves with this horrible disease. What kind of message will this send to the new coming-out generation that is looking to us for inspiration and leadership? What were you thinking?

Jeff Allen
Ormond Beach, Florida

Your barebacking issue, with its cover that lovingly romancizes, glamorizes and eroticizes Tony Valenzuela, sends a terrible message—that it is OK to become positive because it's now controllable.

I was infected most likely in the late '70s. I've been around the block. Yes, the wild life was fun, but I've paid a great price. I watched all my old friends die. Because of the new drugs I'm still alive with plenty of T-cells, but I've had severe neuropathy for 10 years, which has spread all over my body. I live in severe pain that even morphine cannot control. The meds have destroyed my digestive system and food repulses me. As a result of the neuropathy, last summer I fell and broke my hip, thigh and knee.

Before an HIV negative person barebacks, I'd like them to spend a day and see what my life is like. I believe they'd think twice.

Donald Adler
New York City

Three cheers once again to *POZ* for giving a national legitimate forum to the subject of barebacking. Yes, it strikes a nerve with all of us. Yes, it fills me with ambivalent feelings. Yes, I've done it myself more than once in the past year. But unless we continue to talk to each other in and out of the bedroom about what we do and why, we will never survive.

I commend Tony Valenzuela, Stephen Gendin, Michael Scarce and the men he interviewed for giving a face and voice to the complex issue of sex in this confusing time. Thanks so much for taking chances and keeping your head out of the sand.

Philip Bahr
New York City

I had hoped that once Scott O'Hara dropped dead, his "who-gives-a-shit-about-anyone-else" unsafe-sex attitude would be buried or burned with him. In Stephen Gendin you have found another shallow, immature, self-serving figure to contaminate the pages of *POZ*. Gendin describes Tony Valenzuela with his "clear, strong gaze" as possessing a "snappy, masculine image," a "beautiful confident man" with whom Gendin was "on the brink of a kiss when his roommate showed up." An objective journalist he is not.

POZ is published under the banner "Because AIDS isn't over." It seems to me that your position depends on prolonging the epidemic. Did you give any thought to how Gendin's article might play to those who are not savvy enough to put it in proper perspective? Is adorning the cover with a suggestive photo of a self-indulgent porno puta going to have a positive effect? Are you interested in curbing the epidemic or are you condoning suicide/homicide as long as it feels good?

Paul Bowley
Mountain View, California

I've come to expect cutting-edge journalism from *POZ*, which has never shied away from controversy, and the article on Tony Valenzuela and barebacking was most appropriate. But the role that Valenzuela plays in any prevention message must be carefully examined. By promoting the notion that it's every man for himself, he inadvertently diminishes the importance of community. As a public figure and educator, his discussion of barebacking without touching upon the consequences is the height of recklessness. Valenzuela's positive test result may have given him a sense of freedom, but with that freedom comes responsibility.

Michael A. Torres

Tallahassee, Florida

Are you people crazy?! Giving Tony Valenzuela the spotlight to put forth his philosophy is the height of irresponsibility. First of all, anyone who defines any spiritual connection with having a man come inside him is ignorant of what spirituality truly is. I am deeply saddened when I think of people who have died, who are sick and, worst of all, who are not yet infected but because of this glorification will be soon. I hope *POZ* takes responsibility for what this article brings. If even one person gets infected, it will be up to you to rectify.

On the flip side, Michael Scarce's article was a real look at how barebacking is spreading in our community and how these people think (if you can call it that).

One last thing: What the hell is "safer barebacking"?

Ron Mosher
San Diego

While I commend your courage to publish a cover article on Tony Valenzuela promoting the discussion about barebacking, I am infuriated and dismayed by the attention lavished on his irresponsible, destructive behavior. I hope you do not condone an individual who puts his sexual partners at peril by such risk-taking.

Barebacking has, does, and will continue as a sexual activity. However, I am appalled by your publication's seeming promotion of the individual's single-issue campaign, which may very well derail the prevention community's efforts to halt the spread of HIV and stigmas associated with it.

David R. Blair
Executive Director, Positively Speaking
San Diego

I commend you for your bravery on trying to tackle the barebacking issue, especially in a climate that would love to draw and quarter any of us who are open to discussing our practice of sex without condoms. As a gay man who remembers visiting his first friend in the hospital with PCP in 1982, I am not unaware of the eventualities of the disease I carry. Since my own seroconversion—which incidentally happened while using condoms—I have not practiced condom sex with other HIV positive partners and I have not fucked any HIV negative men at all. That is the safe sex I am willing to practice.

Keith Folger
Via the Internet

I do not recall any article in *POZ* that angered me more than "They Shoot Barebackers, Don't They?" As a mental-health professional, Tony Valenzuela's irresponsible and reprehensible

behavior does not warrant the sobriquet *sacrificial lamb*. He quoted his "number-one backer"—his mother—as having a "natural understanding" for the "value of skin-on-skin sex." A natural understanding of what? It feels better to get fucked up the ass without protection, exposing your partner to HIV? Valenzuela's logic—"I believe the risk for those who top bareback is minimal"—goes beyond rationalization. This is a dangerous narcissist who does not want to accept his responsibility for people he may have infected.

As for his mother, well, mothers love their serial-killer sons, too. Her son is a loser, his "beauty and brains" notwithstanding. He is one dangerous pay-for-sex person who can't even maintain a job. How dare *POZ* glamorize such behavior.

Terrence O'Sullivan
New York City

Thank you for your brave cover story exploring bareback sex. I applaud those who are honest enough to admit that they take and accept the risk of unsafe sex. Sex is supposed to be sacred, wonderful and joyful. It's time the gay community stops adopting a finger-pointing mob mentality regarding the sexual transmission of HIV. We must each be responsible for our own health and accept the consequences if we choose to play skin to skin.

We should be beyond blame by now. If I am HIV positive, it's because I did not take the necessary precautions—it's no one's fault except my own.

John D. Royalty
Lexington, Kentucky

Has Tony Valenzuela ever experienced serious illness? Is he searching for a miracle? Who would not agree with the Religious Right's argument that homosexuals are hedonistic recruiters and murderers? It's enough to sway both moderate Republicans and Democrats to their side. I fear that much-needed money for AIDS research and support will dry up as a result of this blatant disregard for self-care. Who will pay for our medical care if we are not at the front line of our own defense? Valenzuela and others are guiding thousands of gay men blindfolded into a world of disease and suffering with, maybe, no miracle.

Stefan Scott
New York City

I was outraged to read about the attitudes of those who bareback. Are their lives so empty that they have to resort to such risky behaviors to feel alive? Are condoms and safe sex that objectionable? Obviously, some in the gay community have not learned a thing from the AIDS pandemic. It seems to me that they are reacting to the message of safe sex like an adolescent rejecting the authority of his parents. Grow up! You are dealing with people's lives!

The reference in your article to the 45-year-old “gift giver” and his 21-year-old HIV negative sex partner was particularly disturbing. I only wish I had had the chance that the 21-year-old has, knowing the consequence of not practicing safe sex. I’m certain many will agree that whatever fleeting pleasure one may receive, barebacking is not worth the price of living with HIV. Just in case this 21-year-old is still considering receiving his “gift”—HIV puts a major damper on your sex drive and HMOs no longer cover the cost of testosterone shots!

Jeff Hostetler
Brooklyn, New York

The articles on barebacking were absolutely depressing. It is unfortunate that they both romanticized skin-on-skin sex while ignoring the implicit risks involved. We are living in an age of the absence of personal accountability. People seek permission to engage in risky behaviors, claiming no individual responsibility.

The last time I remember such irresponsibility was 13 years ago when I felt skin-on-skin was the only way to have sex. Being a top, I didn’t think I’d get infected. Wrong! I have been infected for the last 13 years.

Those who actively seek infection or shift responsibility for protection to others will be the first to scream for help from society when their own personal hell breaks loose. What if society took the same attitude as these reckless individuals?

David J. Begley
Via the Internet

I’ve read *POZ* with great interest for two years and I am impressed by your articulate reporting. However, I was outraged that the discussion on barebacking was presented in such an exploitative fashion. Particularly offensive was the idea that giving HIV to someone or the possibility of reinfecting another positive person is a “gift” with some spiritual connotation. This is utter nonsense.

We gay men need to stop being so selfish about our sexual needs. If I was straight, my reaction would be “Why are we helping the gay community if they’re not helping themselves? Let them screw each other to death!” The first step in the AIDS crisis, as in life, is responsibility. I have no empathy for people who bareback in 1999, whatever their status.

T. Brennion
Boston

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