Truth and Dare

November 1, 2001 By Denny Lee

Is Seth Watkins a moron or a role model for Gen-Y gay men? In the no-news dog days of mid-August, Watkins became a mug for newly infected young gay men in a front-page Sunday *New York Times* piece about slacking safe-sex practices. According to the *Times*, Watkins still samples the erotic emporiums of Babylon-by-the-Bay, enjoying the occasional rubberless romp, which the paper of record's 2.5 million Sunday readers would learn is called "barebacking." They also learned that the 24-year-old is an HIV prevention counselor for San Fran's Department of Public Health.

"You're a moron," penned gay syndicated sex-columnist Dan Savage, who is HIV free and has written about having condomless sex with his neg partner. "Jesus Christ, what kind of an IQ test does a person have to flunk to work in HIV prevention?" Soon after, a congressional subcommittee wrote to Watkins' boss, urging a review of policies about prevention workers who engage in unprotected sex. "This behavior is not only unacceptable but deadly," the letter stated.

Watkins said that by airing his laundry, he intended to help other young gay men navigate the confusing mix of loneliness, low self-esteem and alcohol that led to his own seroconversion. "I am like any other gay man out there, dealing with the same choices," he says. "The *Times* made me into someone I am not, and turned me into an interesting lead for an article about unsafe sex."

Steve Tierney, director of HIV prevention for the health department, said as much when he told *The San Francisco Chronicle*, "Why a congressional committee is interested in the private sex life of a 24-year-old prevention worker is beyond comprehension."

As for the insinuation that he is infecting others, the Scarlet Man claims that the *Times* glossed over his nuanced strategy to back-room barebacking. As a bottom, he accepts the risk of further exposure because studies about reinfection are inconclusive. As a top, he inserts "free willy" only where others have already gone. "At anonymous sex venues, people don't talk about disclosure -- there's hardly any talk," he says. "Everyone assumes the men are HIV positive." Is that what he advises clients to do? "My job is to work with them on their issues," he says. "What others don't realize is people in the field of prevention are human beings, too."

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