Up Close and Impersonal

Can an electronic greeting card ease the drama of face-to-face HIV disclosure?

April 1, 2006 By Bob Ickes

Sure, cybersex is a no-risk activity...but what about cyber-disclosure? There's an electronic greeting card for every occasion, from birthdays to bar mitzvahs, so it was only a matter of time before an e-card arrived for a very un-Hallmark moment: telling a sex partner, after a hookup, that you might have exposed them to an STD. The Internet Notification Service for Partners or Tricks (inSPOT.org) offers several such announcements. The HIV option: "There's no easy way to say this: but I want you to know that I'm HIV-positive. If you don't know your status, please get tested soon." The site's founder, Deb Levine, says: "[Researchers] found that people tell primary partners but not hookups or tricks." Last December, the program sent 38,000 HIV cards.

No, there's no easy way to say it. But inSPOT's way is easier than others—for the senders, anyway. They can assuage any post-tryst guilt without the worry of stigma and protect against criminal prosecution if sent anonymously. (In certain states, a post-sex disclosure could land you in the clink.) It's also an easy way for the newly diagnosed to contact past sexual partners.

HIV advocate Robert Klitzman, MD, thinks e-cards neglect the receiver, and he fears that they could promote unsafe behavior. "[Senders] think they're off the hook just because they sent an e-mail and never hear back," Klitzman says. "The recipient could panic." Especially if he or she receives it, say, on a BlackBerry during a meeting. Klitzman also wonders how many messages will be lost to spam filters and firewalls—and how many will inspire receivers to use inSPOT's testing and treatment info. Still, he says, e-disclosure is better than no disclosure at all.

All this assumes you get a partner's e-mail address. Something to remember the next time you kiss and don't tell.

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