Whose Advocate?

Sex survey raises alarm but not consciousness

October 1, 1994 By Bill Henning

Earlier this year, a lesbian and gay news-magazine, *The Advocate*, asked its male readers to fill out a sex survey. The 171-question survey, devised by a physician, a psychologist and a sociologist, focused on the sexual identities, relationships, current sexual practices, drug use and health of gay and bisexual men. Well, the results are in and they support a notion advanced by several recent studies: Many gay men today are taking chances on exposure to HIV. A startling 44 percent of men who had insertive anal intercourse in the past year reported that they had ejaculated in a partner without wearing a condom. Among those who had receptive anal intercourse, 58 percent had a partner ejaculate in them without a condom. Clearly, either safer sex education has failed or it is rapidly losing effectiveness.

After applauding *The Advocate* for broadcasting that alarm, however, people may want to press the magazine to purge their future surveys of bias against people with HIV. Participants in this survey were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “I can tell if someone has HIV by the way he looks and acts” -- a worthy attempt to gauge the prevalence of a dangerous and offensive myth. But when responses to that survey item are summed up by saying, "Most men *recognize* the difficulty of *judging* whether another person is *infected* by HIV," [emphasis ours], the myth is reinforced. The shift in word choice suggests that trying to visually determine a person’s HIV status is a common and even desirable practice.

Now, some might think that’s splitting hairs but several glaring omissions in the summary of the survey’s results as well as in the survey itself also betray a bias against people with HIV. The summary reports that 44 percent of the men surveyed who have had insertive oral intercourse during the past year had ejaculated into a partner’s mouth. It then goes on to tell us that 26 percent of HIV positive men have done so, “most typically with someone they have just met.” Percentages of men who have not been tested or who have tested negative and cum in a partner’s mouth are not revealed in the published results -- let alone how well they knew the partner involved. Only the irresponsible behavior of HIV positive men is reported, demonizing them.

Similarly, *The Advocate* reports that 11 percent of men who have tested HIV positive have said or implied that they were HIV negative in order to have sex. The survey did not go on to ask if that sex was safer sex. More important, the survey did not even bother to ask men who had not been tested for HIV if they had ever said or implied that they were HIV negative in order to have sex.

The survey dangerously promotes one of the public's greatest AIDS fears -- the specter of people with HIV wantonly and knowingly exposing others to the virus. But given CDC estimates that 85 percent of Americans have not been tested for HIV, perhaps what the public should really fear is hordes of HIV positive people -- who have not been tested -- unknowingly spreading the virus.

Asked to comment on these aspects of the survey, *Advocate* Editor in Chief Jeff Yarbrough said POZ "might be pushing it" and referred us to Dr. Janet Lever, one of the survey's creators and the author of the magazine's survey results summary. Lever did not feel that the question about HIV positive men lying to prospective sex partners about their HIV status needed to be balanced by asking untested men if they had deceived partners about their status. She emphasized the importance of the data they did collect: "If it reflects badly on a handful of HIV positive people, so be it," she said. "You can't be Pollyanna-ish on these issues." Unfortunately, the data cast suspicion on *all* people with HIV. And the survey ignores the fact that a person's risk of being exposed to HIV by a deceitful HIV positive person is the same whether that person knows their HIV status or not. *The Advocate*'s researchers missed a rare opportunity to drive that point home and eclipse a dangerous, media-driven myth. Instead, sadly, they reinforced that stereotype.

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