Editor’s Letter

Mother Lode

September 1, 2009 By Regan Hofmann

When I first came to *POZ* three and a half years ago, I was asked on national TV whether I’d consider having a child. I said, “Yes.”

I got a wave of angry e-mails and calls from people who wondered how I could be so “selfish” as to even consider it. Some asked how I could justify putting my partner and child at risk; others asked me to defend possibly adding to the world’s HIV-positive population; and still others wondered why I would want to give birth to a child who could, perhaps soon, be motherless.

It astounded me then, as it still does today, that people don’t realize it’s very possible for an HIV-positive woman to have an HIV-negative baby. If the woman is on antiretroviral therapy and the child isn’t breast-fed, the risk of mother-to-child transmission is less than 2 percent. Thanks to in vitro fertilization (IVF), my partner would not be at risk. And, hopefully, I can expect to live a long life, despite HIV. So why shouldn’t I consider having a baby?

According to a 2008 amfAR-sponsored survey, only 14 percent of Americans believe that HIV-positive women should have a child. Meanwhile, 59 percent think women with cancer and 47 percent think women with depression should have a child. Obviously there are still many misperceptions around HIV.

Which explains why we decided to put Luz de Jesus Roman on our cover. I met Luz last year, and she told me she wanted to share her story. She said that too many women, especially Latinas, aren’t aware of their risk for HIV or, if they become positive, understand that life can go on and that they can be mothers.

The numbers of new infection rates in the United States among Latinos are rising. In 2006, Latinos represented 17 percent of all new HIV infections and 19 percent of all new AIDS cases. As Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr. writes about in “Lost in Translation”, this is partly due to the community’s belief that they are not at risk for the virus. The media are doing a poor job communicating that HIV is a thriving and dangerously unchecked pandemic among Latino people—all over the world.

Which brings us to Cuba.

When I first heard they were locking up people who tested positive on the island, I cringed. The idea that people could lose their freedom in the name of public health sounds unconscionable. And yet, ironically, because of this seemingly atrocious measure, Cuba stemmed the epidemic and delivered care and treatment to nearly all of its HIV-positive population. The high literacy rate in Cuba is one of the many reasons that the messages about HIV/AIDS were successfully delivered there. People are able to read the truth about their HIV risk.

Knowing the power the media has to raise awareness and change behavior, I call all media in honor of National Latino HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (October 15) to speak honestly and loudly to the Latino community about HIV. Because, as Luz shows us, when the right information gets out, we can stop HIV from spreading from one generation to the next.

P.S. Speaking of "babies," I wrote a book! It's called *I Have Something to Tell You*, and it's in bookstores on September 29. You can preorder it online at amazon.com. Please read it and let me know what you think!

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