Editor’s Letter

Instruments of Mass Prevention

July 1, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

At my first International AIDS Conference, in Toronto in 2006, I wondered why the U.S. had never hosted the global gathering. The reason, of course, is the travel ban that prevents HIV-positive foreigners from entering America—for work or for play.

Certainly, the medical experts advising our federal policymakers who allow this antiquated and unnecessary law to remain are familiar with the studies that show that those aware of their HIV status are very unlikely to expose others to the virus. The notion that we can control the spread of HIV in the U.S. by keeping HIV-positive people out of our country is absurd. Ironically, as we point out in this month’s feature story about AIDS traveling across borders, it is more common for foreigners to contract HIV in the U.S. than it is for them to import the disease.

And if allowing HIV-positive people into a nation were truly a threat to its public health and national security, how then could we, in good conscience, justify sending American HIV-positive doctors, treatment experts, researchers, activists, journalists and pharmaceutical employees overseas to help people living with the virus in foreign countries? It seems terribly hypocritical to impose a danger on others we would not face ourselves.

The truth is that people living with HIV are not generally dangerous and are ideally suited to counsel others on preventing, treating and living with the disease. People with HIV who are willing to disclose their status can be powerful agents for positive behavioral change in others. I know that telling my story has resulted in more than one person saying that because they met me they believe that HIV is a real risk and that they will take steps to protect themselves from the virus.

Which is why we put Jeremiah Johnson on our cover. A Peace Corps volunteer who contracted HIV while serving his country in a humanitarian outreach capacity in Ukraine, Johnson was expelled from the Peace Corps. He asked why he could not continue to serve as a Peace Corps volunteer in another country that did allow HIV-positive foreigners entry and work visas. As a result, as we go to press, the Peace Corps is claiming that it has reconsidered its policy on HIV-positive Peace Corps enlistees.

I know a little about how Johnson feels. Last summer, when I was en route to the International AIDS Conference, in Sydney, the U.S. State Department sent me to Taiwan and Vietnam to discuss

HIV prevention and stigma. When I arrived at the international airport in Taipei, I worried that customs would inspect my bags and find my HIV meds. If they did, they would also find the arsenal of pharmaceuticals I had brought to protect me from the many physical threats I faced by visiting the region, including: dengue fever, malaria, dysentery and SARS. I laughed, thinking that little ole immune-compromised me had a lot more to fear from the Pacific Rim than it did from me. I made it out of Asia having avoided spreading HIV and having managed not to contract dengue fever.

As I prepare to pack for yet another international jaunt, this time to Mexico, the host nation of this year's International AIDS Conference, I have that irrational fear that I will be prohibited from entering my destination country—that I will be stopped and sent home at the border though I pose no true threat. But then I remember that I have been invited to travel to Mexico on behalf of its government to be part of the ongoing discussion about how to fight AIDS globally.

The idea that HIV-positive people are "dangerous" must evolve—into extinction. It's high time that some in the United States government start seeing HIV-positive people from all countries not as potential weapons of mass destruction but instead as instruments of mass prevention.

Regan Hofmann
Editor in Chief
Email: editor-in-chief@poz.com

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