Say What? Greek Edition

February 10, 2014 By Trent Straube

“HIV rates and heroin use have risen significantly [in Greece], with about half of new HIV infections being self-inflicted to enable people to receive benefits of €700 per month.” —World Health Organization

“The government has not been fair in its redistribution [of wealth], and this is leading to some people experiencing cuts in welfare benefits—and to make up the difference, Greeks are self-inflicting themselves with HIV. It’s all the fault of the Greek government.” —Rush Limbaugh

In a 234-page report on health inequality in Europe, the World Health Organization (WHO) mentioned in one sentence that a significant number of Greeks were purposefully contracting HIV so they could get government benefits of about $950 a month. This was erroneous, and WHO issued a correction, stating that there was no evidence for self-infliction. Nonetheless, U.S. conservatives like Rush Limbaugh jumped at the false data as proof of “what the welfare state does to people” and, presumably, why such benefits should be cut. It is true, however, that Greece is in a financial crisis and that suicides, prostitution, murder and theft have skyrocketed.

Also from Greece comes the documentary Ruins: Chronicles of an HIV Witch-hunt, viewable online for free. It’s a criminalization tale of the women rounded up by police during the 2012 election season, allegedly for prostitution or drug use, and forced to undergo health checks. Those found to be HIV positive were imprisoned and charged with a felony, and their names and images were released to the media. What’s more, Greece’s health minister recently reinstated regulations that allow for forced HIV testing.

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