Redefining Sex at the CDC

March 25, 2014 By Trent Straube

Language matters. Spurred by an open letter from advocates, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) agreed to no longer use the term “unprotected sex” when it specifically means “sex without condoms.” The phrases are not synonymous. For example, HIV-positive people with undetectable viral loads and HIV-negative people taking Truvada as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) are not necessarily engaging in unprotected high-risk sex if they ditch the condoms.

The CDC letter, spearheaded by the HIV Prevention Justice Alliance, also urged the agency to recommend quarterly HIV testing for men who have sex with men (MSM)—instead of annual testing—and to clarify whether it includes or excludes transgender people in studies. Hey, if Webster’s dictionary can constantly evolve, why can’t we?

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