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To bare the truth about bareback desires is effective prevention

October 1, 1997 By Sean Strub

Since I began publishing POZ, I've become increasingly skeptical of what I learn from the media. Seeing the process up close has made me aware of how easily and often the "news" can be misreported, manipulated or modified.

A case in point is the media's response to an essay POZ published in June, "Riding Bareback" by Stephen Gendin, about a single act of unprotected anal sex he had with another positive man. Gendin addressed the real and theoretical dangers of reinfection; he and his partner had even discussed them beforehand. Gendin stated that he wasn't sure he would do this again, nor did he recommend the practice to others. This column followed four pages of editorial about Gabriel Rotello's book, Sexual Ecology, addressing similar issues. The May POZ included a major article about reinfection risks. So Stephen Gendin's column wasn't published in an editorial vacuum.

Still, all hell broke loose. Syndicated columnist Alexander Cockburn, Out columnist Michelangelo Signorile, The Windy City Times' Dan Perreten and others equated Stephen's personal essay with XtremeSex, a website created by HIV positive men to meet each other for unprotected sex. Sadly, XtremeSex has become a place where a tiny fringe of gay men who either want to get infected or want to infect others have posted messages, and this has become the focus of legitimate concern and much debate.

Now, there is a huge difference between Stephen Gendin's account of unprotected sex between two men with HIV - long a common, if largely unpublicized, practice - and the website's promotion of HIV transmission. To confuse the two is sensationalistic and a tactic reminiscent of those who equate homosexuality with pedophilia.

London's Positive Nation, in an otherwise astute article, wrote that Gendin's column was about "bareback sex parties"; Stephen and his partner may have constituted a party, but of fewer persons than the piece implied. In an extraordinary example of disinformation, Art & Understanding, which calls itself "America's AIDS Magazine," claimed that POZ, in an editorial (!), advised readers to join "in the recent trend of unsafe sex."

Mike Signorile is a friend of mine. Yet I can't help but compare the reaction to Stephen's POZ column - a furor stoked in part by Mike - to the reaction to a column Signorile wrote a couple of years ago. That piece, about a bareback-sex experience he had, was published in Out and

reprinted on the op-ed page of The New York Times.

The differences? Mike was drunk, HIV negative, didn't know the HIV status of his partner and didn't discuss the risks with his partner before they had sex; Stephen and his partner were both positive and knew exactly what they were doing.

Mike voiced his understandable fear and regret afterward; he was ashamed and contrite. He also expressed anger, indignation and blame at his partner (remember the Times' headline: "HIV Positive and Irresponsible"?). Stephen had the audacity to say the experience was sexually gratifying and that he (like most people with or without HIV) had fantasized about having unprotected sex.

Mike was widely heralded as brave and courageous for writing about a subject that had been verboten; Stephen has been vilified, accused of promoting unsafe sex and lumped in with disturbed men who wish to infect others or get infected.

All this reminds me of the furor Joycelyn Elders instigated when she advocated discussion of masturbation as an aspect to safe-sex education for adolescents. It is clear that those who bring up sexually charged topics and affirm desire- - such as Stephen Gendin and Dr. Elders - pay a heavy price. Unless, of course, they do so in the context of repentance, in which case they are praised and uplifted.

Signorile wrote recently that POZ seems to "eerily glamorize AIDS." I wonder if that perception isn't driven by the fact that POZ recognizes, encourages and admires the sexuality of all people, including those who have HIV. Let no one misunderstand: People with HIV have no less right to intimacy, love and sex than anyone else.

Safe sex is a complex, difficult and ongoing process, and POZ is committed to reporting on it for both positive and negative people. We have to speak the truth about what we desire and do sexually - as the first step in reinvigorating effective prevention efforts. To fail at this paves the way to further stigmatization and criminalization of people with HIV.

The "gag rule" on abortion is punishable by law; we can't let the community's self-imposed "gag rule" on the the sexuality and desires of HIV positive gay men become, as some have suggested, punishable by social and political ostracism. This "gag rule" is a direct route to increasing HIV infections, and if that happens, the political prognosis for those of us already infected will become even bleaker.

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