Viral Vernacular

Since the days when we didn't have a vocabulary for discussing AIDS, POZ has advocated for a gentle turn of phrase for the virus and those living with it.

May 1, 2009 By Laura Whitehorn and Kellee Terrell

In the second issue of *POZ* in 1994, Sean Strub, the magazine's founder, wrote, "Language influences how society, politicians and health care providers view people with AIDS. Most important, it influences how we view ourselves." Words, Strub also wrote, affect health itself. "If a person is assaulted with constant death sentence messages, the immune system can't function well." Setting a positive tone when talking about HIV advances *POZ's* goal: promoting the survival and dignity of people living with HIV.

Accurate, sensitive and empowering language has been desperately needed ever since the epidemic's early days, when fear of the unknown ruled and medical treatment was nowhere in sight. Then, mainstream media and evangelical leaders used stigmatizing terms to describe us: *GRID, AIDS victim, promiscuous, diseased* and *sinner*, to name a few charmers. When *POZ* came on the scene in 1994, it joined an HIV community fighting for its rights and respect. The nation had had ample time to wrap its mind and heart around the epidemic. But oppressive labels such as *AIDS-infected, AIDS-carrying, contagious* and *got the package* were still used to refer to people living with HIV.

The name *POZ* didn't emerge from a focus group or the political agenda du jour. According to Strub, it was accidental— a friend casually referred to people with HIV as "pozzies." Instantly, Strub thought it was "colloquial and positive," and the three-letter brand *POZ* was born.

POZ played a dual role as a member of both the HIV community and the media. Our title recognized the seriousness of HIV but added our own spin. At that time, the gay community heavily influenced AIDS activism. *POZ* sounded and felt very much like the in-your-face labels—*queer*, *fag* and *dyke*—that members of the gay community stole from the haters, remodeling them as tools of acceptance and pride in their own identity. (When *POZ* launched, a now-defunct satirical AIDS zine called *Diseased Pariah News* was still around.)

Beyond our brand name itself, POZ described our community in ways intended to counter negative perspectives and force others to rethink HIV—and what living with it meant. When folks said, "He's HIV," we corrected them: "A person is not a virus. You *have* a virus, but you *are* a person." When countless media outlets wrote *AIDS-infected*, we taught them to use *HIV positive* and *people living*

with the virus instead. Our content embraced this quest. With stories about HIV-positive artists, activists, mothers, teachers and politicians, we ushered in a shift in thinking: Positive people are not just patients. They are human beings with lives that reach far beyond any microorganism.

POZ understood that anyone living with HIV is likely to be someone's patient. And while we appreciated our doctors, nurses and researchers, we kicked them off their pedestals, placing them on the same plane as those living with HIV. That's why *POZ* lists a degree after the first mention of a doc, then identifies him or her as we do anyone else—last name only, please.

In the early days, this was part of our effort to encourage self-empowerment on the part of those living with HIV. We refused to accept death as the only option, to listen passively as experts insisted that because there were no treatments, there was little hope. When treatment did become available, we refused to allow doctors to push pills or doses we thought to be dangerous. We became activists by necessity—stripping off our hospital gowns, strapping up our combat boots and sharpening our journalistic pencils.

And, we became treatment experts ourselves. We learned (and wrote) about viruses, bacteria and fungi; red and white blood cells; B cells and T cells. And when HIV came to be touted as a manageable condition, we heard more and more tales of disastrous side effects. We reminded people that *manageable* is another word that's easy to say if you don't actually have HIV. At a time when medical personnel minimized the difficulty of enduring side effects, we relayed how HIV-positive people suffered through days and nights of nausea, diarrhea, neuropathy, lipoatrophy…you name it. We showed how our readers said, "Yes, we're grateful for meds, but we still have a right to a full life without facial wasting and tingling feet." As we had before, we questioned the appropriateness of using *manageable* to describe HIV.

We made an error, though, by increasingly leaving AIDS out of the picture. By referring exclusively to ourselves as *people living with HIV*, we created the illusion that AIDS was gone (it wasn't). We did this more consistently after combo therapy swept onto the stage in the mid-1990s. By omitting the word *AIDS*, we did our own part to mask the sharp edges of the epidemic that had not gone away.

The HIV community is not now and never has been virally homogenous. Some people are living with HIV; others are living with AIDS; still others are dying. As part of the media, we don't want to participate in a cover-up of AIDS. As part of the community, we don't want to isolate any of our brothers and sisters. And so, until the epidemic is over, we are all living with HIV/AIDS.

There were other times when we did not get it right. Remember *HIVers*? Writing with tight word counts, we began using that one as early as 1997. Each time we changed *people living with* HIV to HIVers, we shaved off three words and filled the space with extra information. But we missed the ugh factor until some friends in the community looked at a cover line one day in 2003 and said, "What's a hiver?" It had become, we realized, another inappropriate way of identifying people with their virus. The word is gone from our pages now, but we fear it has seeped into the language and done damage. Our bad.

While our efforts as part of a vibrant, creative HIV community have made a difference over the past 15 years, we're not naïve enough to think that our linguistic work is done. Phrases such as down low, full-blown AIDS and AIDS *sufferers* still flourish, and some in the gay community continue to tag words such as *clean or drug- and disease-free* (DDF) on their dating site profiles.

Until the end of the epidemic, we will continue to question the vernacular so that one day these offensive terms, like HIV itself, will long be history.

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