About Face

August 21, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

When I first heard that the Chinese government was promoting safer sex at the 2008 Olympic Games by distributing information and condoms in hotels throughout Beijing, I was psyched (yeah, I know, I?m so ?80s). (Read the story here: http://www.asiacatalyst.org/DJpr0808.html and and http://www.abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=56038308&page=1). Their reasoning? They want to crackdown on potential protesters. Detainees will not be allowed to leave the country while the Olympics are taking place. Which begs the question of whether the Chinese still fear that admitting that they have an AIDS epidemic will taint their reputation.

?None of the Asia Catalyst fellows planned to speak to the media or protest while overseas,? Meg Davis of Asia Catalyst said. ?As always, Chinese authorities generate more bad press when they detain peaceful AIDS advocates than when they simply allow them to get on with their work.?

One of the AIDS advocates who was kept from traveling is Duan Jun?the 35-year-old founder of AIDS Care Home (????), an organization in Henan province providing support to children affected by AIDS. He has been prominent as a national advocate of AIDS treatment access, and as a representative to the Country Coordinating Mechanism of the Global Fund to Combat AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

A good friend of my family was an executive for Johnson & Johnson during the time when someone tampered with Tylenol. Do you remember the hysteria? His approach to the news?which is now a case study at many famous business schools?was to embrace the truth that someone had messed with Tylenol and, in order to protect the American people, yank every single bottle of Tylenol off the shelf. It cost J&J millions both in the wasted product and in the expense of replacing it. But, in the end, admitting that there was a tainted product and owning the truth that these things happen and openly dealing with it, they possibly saved countless lives. And, ironically, in what could have been a trust-eroding episode, J&J secured the people?s belief in their brand; they are still one of the most trust-worthy American brands today.

Perhaps the Chinese government should consider the impact of what it does to their public face when they punish and detain those who are trying to help the people that The People?s government has so long ignored. Perhaps they should study the Tylenol case and imagine how much better they might look if they embraced the fact that AIDS is an epidemic in China, and if they were willing to focus as much on treatment as they seem to be on prevention.

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