Cipha Sounds Off: Fire Him Up, Yes - Fire Him, No!

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By Kate Ferguson (Editor-in-Chief, Real Health)

Last week, Cipha Sounds, a host of NYC's Hot 97 "The Cipha Sounds and Rosenberg Show" had a case of that most dreaded of conditions "foot-in-mouth disease." More dreaded than, say, HIV? I'd say, yes, infinitely more so, and that's saying a lot because even today, some 30 years after we know how the virus is transmitted, people still insist on stigmatizing certain population groups as being scary human carriers of the disease.

What Cipha Sounds said is a head scratcher that created a furor spilling into this week. On the surface, his statement negates all the HIV education and awareness efforts of the past three decades. The soundbite goes a little som'n like this "The reason I'm HIV negative is because I don't mess with Haitian girls."

Now what made him say that--even if it was a joke? (Are you scratching your head yet or maybe screwing up your face to reflect, "Say what?"

Yup, Cipha Sounds went there.

Later, the DJ, whose government name is Luis Diaz, apologized to the radio station's audience. He called his remark "a stupid, tasteless joke." (Hmm, maybe there's a glimmer of hope after all cuz he recognized...)

Anyway, back to my original point. What was he thinking? Has he been HIV home schooled or what?

But the thing is, I think those who called for the station to fire Diaz are also missing a point. Sure, the DJ's "joke" is not at all funny. And, sure, Cipha Sounds "sounds" like a throwback to days we'd rather not remember (or maybe we should so, like history, they don't get repeated).

The fact is that Haitians were scapegoats when doctors uncovered the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s. When researchers discovered that a number of Haitians had Kaposi's sarcoma and other AIDS-related conditions, medical journals and books began the blame game.

As a result, Haitians suffered severe discrimination and stigma. Haitian immigrants lost jobs and homes amidst the hysteria until more cooler heads prevailed and the crazy talk died down.

As I said, why Cipha Sounds chose such an ill-advised subject to get a laugh is beyond me. I can only

believe that it must be ignorance--the kind that shows he knows nothing of history and so is insensitive to the effect of his statement.

This week, protestors gathered outside Hot 97's studio and clamored for Diaz's firing. But is that the really the answer?

What gave me added cause for hope is when I read that the Haitian community suggested Hot 97 apologize. Well, OK, but well, how about a few more mea culpas from Cipha Sounds too? And one community group wanted the station to institute an HIV education program aimed at its young minority listeners. Well, OK, I can go for that too. Why? because HIV education equals awareness.

But fire him? Nah. I say, when people show their ignorance like this it reflects poorly on them. What's more, in a crazy, roundabout sort of way, it provides the community with an opportunity to offer enlightenment, education and sensitivity training to God knows how many others who think such issues make good joke material.

This way, HIV awareness and education will always get the last laugh.

What do you think?

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