HIV and “Healthy” Gay Men

December 10, 2010 By POZ Staff

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The following quote is from a recent front-page article in *The New York Times* about pre-exposure prophylaxsis (PrEP): “Healthy gay men who took an anti-AIDS pill every day were well protected against contracting HIV in a study suggesting that a new weapon against the epidemic has emerged.”

The implication is that HIV-positive gay men are not healthy. Suspecting my own bias (and tendency to be picky and crotchety about language), I checked with our dictionary friends Merriam and Webster.

Here’s how they define healthy: “enjoying health and vigor of body, mind, or spirit; well.” They go on to list synonyms (able-bodied, bouncing, fit, hale, hearty, robust, sound, well, well-conditioned, whole, wholesome, in fine fettle, in shape, in the pink) and antonyms (ailing, diseased, ill, sick, unfit, unhealthy, unsound, unwell).

I also object to blithe media coverage referring to HIV/AIDS as “manageable,” an adjective that can get old fast if you are living with the virus--and with the daily pill doses, regular lab and clinic visits, and for many, debilitating side effects like lipoatrophy or peripheral neuropathy.

But you can deal with all of those things and still be healthy.

What I’d like from the media is balance--a sense that living with HIV/AIDS is mutable, many-faceted, not something you can put into a box or a simplistic definition.

What most bothers me about the wording--and the implicit exclusion of gay men living with HIV from the healthy, hearty band--is that it’s another stereotype, a back handed way to write off HIV-positive people and dump them into a sickly heap.

It reminds me of the offensive words on some dating sites, like “clean” and “disease-free.” It’s also part of the stigmatization of HIV, the aura of doom overhanging the virus that can help keep people from getting tested and getting into care.

And getting tested and being in the care of a doctor or clinic is exactly what allows HIV-positive people to lead, shall we dare say, healthy lives.

To read more about PrEP, click here.

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