



“It is Never Just HIV”: The debate that never happened

January 9, 2011 By [Richard Ferri, PhD, ANP](#)

The current heated and polarized “debate” over the “It’s Never Just HIV” by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is not a debate at all. It has become an “attack and condemn” shouting match where the winner takes all. No prisoners are allowed and those who hold an opposing view are just plain wrong and need to be dismissed. It has become a verbal nightmare of “If you are not with us then you are against us”.

It has also become a personal issue of shame and remorse on my part because I played a role in this mockery that is just as pathetic as anyone else’s. I stood my ground, wrote emotionally, and offended some people I truly respect. I was also hammered into the ground publicly and privately. So here is my *mea culpa*. I was wrong to jump into the fray swinging and I am sorry. But, it needs to be said that I was just one of many. All of us who attacked felt we were somehow justified. We were not. I was not. There is never a real justification for this behavior we all displayed so publicly.

To make my position clear, I still support the “Its Never Just HIV” PSA. I do not find it offensive as a gay man living with AIDS. I find it horrifically true from my thirty years of clinical practice as an HIV specialist. Living with HIV is never just about one virus. Living with HIV is about your life being twisted like two cars in a head on collision. Some of us are lucky and able to extract ourselves from the wreckage and get on with our lives; others never do.

I have not seen anyone really disputing the facts of the PSA, but rather the presentation. Some have argued that PSA will only reach a small portion of the population. They may have a point. But my point is that reaching that small segment is still critical. Lets take this opportunity to address HIV as **THE** forgotten worldwide health crisis that it is. There are many more groups of people to be reached and not just the gay men depicted in this PSA.

The patients I see daily are primarily heterosexual, people of color, and female. My patients are a tough population. They are older, have numerous aging and HIV related health problems, live on very limited incomes from social security or disability, are “wet” (a term used to mean still actively using drugs and alcohol) and are feeding themselves from food pantries. I don’t want another new HIV patient, but I know that is a foolish dream.

Many people who are appalled at my support of this ad wonder if I have lost my mind, others attacked my professional credibility, and still others just called me names just as I did in my replies. I think the time for this nonsense to stop is now. Those of us who care passionately about

HIV prevention, and that includes every one screaming at each other, have got to take it down a notch. We have all lost perspective in pursuing our agendas. We have all made grand assumptions, myself included, which have morphed into what should have been a discussion into a nasty screaming match.

So here is why I support the ad as clearly and unemotionally as I can. I feel this PSA is real and honest. Simple as that. Others have dissected every frame of the PSA, and stated their objections for the graphics, the language, the implications of their perceived fear mongering, and even equating the anal cancer section of the PSA with somehow being an attack on gay male sexuality.

I would direct anyone who feels this PSA to be to fear promoting to view a recent PSA/short film done in South Wales on texting while driving. (You can view this PSA at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5NIE3osZEs>)

I have never been so moved from a piece of health prevention education that took sterile facts and figures and dramatized them into a reality that will lance the viewer's heart and mind. Translating dull well-known facts about health hazards into a graphic message in the age of sound bites, and satisfying the insatiable need for immediate communication is not promoting fear in my book. It translates dry academic research into reality just as I feel the HIV PSA does.

Again I can only speak from my view on this very emotional bridge, but I would like my view to be heard and discussed and not condemned just because it is different. I also owe this same respect to those that see things from their view on their bridge.

Hear me clearly for one last time. I am as guilty of the shouting and nastiness as anyone else. I did wrong. I sucker-punched some very good people with very good intentions. I was wrong to do so but I was not alone.

It is now our call on how to move forward. We can continue to shout and name call or we can sit down like grown ups and move the HIV prevention agenda to where it needs to be for everyone. It is time to work together rather than stand on our cyber divides and scream at each other.

So let's stand down, calm down, and talk. Put away the rhetoric and name-calling and have a meaningful discussion like adults. As I have said before it is time to listen to the great American philosopher Pogo: *"We have met the enemy and he is us."*