Microbicides, Men and HIV

July 21, 2010 By Shawn Decker

This year's International AIDS Conference, which happens every two years, is taking place right now, and Poz is reporting on all of the exciting news coming out of Vienna. One of the bits of news that is generating the most interest is a study of the use of HIV preventative microbicides.

Basically, it's an HIV-fighting drug in gel form, which can be applied inside the vagina before having sex, thus reducing the risk of HIV transmission. Though the gel is due for more trials and is likely several years away from being made available at your neighborhood drug store, the initial results have been promising, and the evolution of moving away from condom negotiations and putting women's safety into women's hands (and vaginas) is being hailed as a "game changer".

When Gwenn and I were discussing this news item, my first thought was a personal one: I'd love to have that gel in my nightstand. I'd love to say goodbye to my old friend, the condom, and see what all this skin-on-skin penis-to-vagina fuss is all about. But she made a very astute point, "Once again, the woman has to bear all the responsibility." She likened it to a woman not wanting to get pregnant, thus having to go on birth control because a lot of guys don't like condoms, or get offended, or whatever the excuse is.

And ultimately, the excitement the AIDS community feels has to be recognized for what it is- an admittance that man has failed. A deadly virus that is transmitted through sexual contact, in the end, wasn't motivation enough to take safe sex and condoms seriously. A scientific knowledge of how this virus is transmitted couldn't combat the moralistic "ban" on condoms, including the United States eight-year ban on comprehensive sex education under President Bush Jr.

It really disgusts me. Sexual evolution is a slow and- in modern times- needlessly painful process. I know I view sexual health through the lens of my own infection, which occurred very early in my life and caused me to adapt to the reality of being infectious and juggling that with my own sexual urges. I've made it work, and have a partner in Gwenn who is HIV negative, open to talking about sex, and we have a relationship that is healthy and keeps her safe.

So what happens when the gel becomes available? Does she have to ingest pills (birth control) and cram medication up her vagina just so my penis can enjoy a little extra sensitivity? And, in the end, is that fair?

Ultimately, the game changer needs to be an adjustment of the time-honored, religiously backed

theory that man is superior to woman, and that man knows better and is to be obeyed. We are all biological equals- gay, straight, white, black, female, male, hermaphrodite, whatever the case may be. What HIV has taught us over the last twenty years is that, when it comes to sexual decision-making, the male has proven to be unqualified for the role of sexual decision-maker.

And, if anything, our excitement and hopes over this new gel only proves that point.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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