NY Post’s Shameful AIDS Coverage

May 18, 2011 By Regan Hofmann

I’m appalled by a heinously reported piece in the New York Post that uses HIV as a salacious hook to a story that is not--and should not--be about HIV.

Late yesterday, the New York Post reported that a woman working as a maid in New York’s Sofitel hotel was allegedly sexually assaulted by Dominique Strauss-Kahn, one of the world’s most powerful and richest men--a man who also happens to be running the International Monetary Fund (IMF) while running for the French presidency.

The headline for the piece was: “IMF Accuser in Apt. for HIV Vics.” The accompanying cover line was: “Maid HIV Shocker.”

Talk about burying the lead and misleading the reader.

How about: French Presidential Candidate and Head of IMF Suspect in Sexual Assault Case.

Rather than focus on the purported crime and the man who committed it, the Post used the first nine paragraphs of the story to delve into the woman’s housing situation; a situation that may or may not be an indication of whether (or not) she is living with HIV. The survivor’s lawyer, Jeffrey Shapiro, claimed on *The Today Show* that she was “absolutely not” living in housing for people with HIV, as was claimed by the Post.
The woman (whose name has not been released and who is a widow, mother and originally from West Africa) claimed she was viciously attacked and forced to engage in sexual acts against her will. The Post labels her as the “accuser,” the “victim” and an “HIV victim.” Meanwhile the man who purportedly viciously attacked her is referred to by the Post as “the humiliated 62-year old suspect.” Later in the piece, when describing Kahn, who is on suicide watch and being held without bail, the Post said he has been “reduced to wearing shoes without laces and a medical device to make sure he’s breathing.” It seems the editors of the Post have placed their sympathy in the wrong place. I’m not saying he’s guilty. It’s too early to know. But, given that there are theoretically equal degrees of uncertainty about both claims, it seems only fair that the coverage would not defile one person over the other. Unless that person may have HIV and then, well, they must be a bad person, right? Wrong.

I can’t help but wonder if the Post would be as unsympathetic to the female survivor if her HIV status had not been raised. It’s just too easy for them to take a side: the word of a West African immigrant who lives in low income housing who may have HIV versus the word of one of the most

influential men in the world. The irony is that she may not have HIV and/or that he may. Who's to say that he doesn't have HIV simply because he's not living in housing for people with HIV? I'm not saying he does; I'm saying that technically it's a possibility and if she proves to be HIV-negative and has been sexually assaulted, I hope she has been offered counseling and post-exposure prophylaxis (or "PEP"--a 28-day course of antiretroviral HIV medications that, if commenced within 72 hours of potential exposure can prevent a person who may have been exposed to the human immunodeficiency virus from becoming infected).

The question is: Is her HIV status germane to this piece? No.

Unless, of course, you are Kahn's lawyers looking to discredit her. Then, it might be very important to attach the heavily stigmatized diagnosis of HIV to her. And, by doing so, attempt to render her as a person of "questionable moral character," as many people erroneously construe people living with HIV.

It may also matter if you are the editor of a newspaper whose sales depend on provocative headlines employing the "sticky factor" of the world's most arresting words. If your job is to sell the most dead trees possible, you may just make "HIV" part of your headline as often as you can. People do things for two basic reasons: fear, and desire. That's why "HIV" and "sex" are two words with great power to catch eyeballs. One summons deep and primal fear; the other is synonymous with desire.

The Post's coverage makes one thing searingly clear: Anyone who thinks HIV stigma is any less intense or harmful than it has been for years need only to consider this example to see that HIV remains one of the most reviled topics of all time. And that the fact, or even suggestion, of someone's HIV status remains a powerful tool when trying to discredit their character.

This piece implies that the horror of the idea that this woman may be living with HIV trumps the horror of her assault. That her HIV status is the most important and shocking thing about the case. But how, in 2011, could the notion that someone may be living with HIV be more shocking than what may have happened to her (forced fellatio, sodomy, etc.)?

Even more awful is that this piece posits that though a man may face life in prison for rape--he may have a bigger worry because he may have been exposed to HIV. The first two sentences of the report are, "Dominique Strauss-Kahn may have more to worry about than a possible prison sentence. The IMF chief's alleged sex-assault victim lives in a Bronx apartment rented exclusively for adults with HIV or AIDS."

As we near the 30th anniversary of the first reported cases of what we now know to be HIV (June 5, 2011), I am just dismayed that any media vehicle, even those like the Post that are known to be sensational, are still so irresponsible when it comes to reporting about HIV/AIDS.

Since the Post chose to raise the issue of the alleged survivor's HIV status, why then did it not also discuss the scientific facts about HIV and mention whether or not Kahn has been tested for HIV (or

plans to get tested, as it takes a certain amount of time for changes in the body to occur post HIV-transmission to allow for an accurate HIV-test result)?

The piece mentions that "according to the federal Centers for Disease Control: 'It is possible for either partner to become infected with HIV through performing or receiving oral sex'" but the piece fails to clarify that statement in any helpful way. There is relatively very low risk of HIV infection when performing or receiving oral sex. For a complete, and completely accurate, explanation of HIV risks associated with oral sex, read the lesson on oral sex at POZ's sister site, AIDSmeds.

The Post also failed to mention that if she is living with HIV, there is the possibility that she is on antiretroviral medications and if so is 96% less likely to be able to transmit HIV to a sexual partner--a fact reported by the New York Times last week, on May 12.

This coverage is just gross. Shame on you editors at the New York Post. There are 33.3 million people, 1.2 million of them Americans, living with HIV/AIDS on the planet. Many of them will die if they can't get treatment. Only 6 million people currently have access to care. A big barrier to access to care is HIV-related stigma. By wielding HIV on your pages as you did in this story, you are contributing to a problem that can only be addressed when accurate information is disseminated and people become educated and less fearful about what is, ultimately, nothing more than a disease of the immune system.

I get the editorial instinct to titillate and grab people's attention. I'm an editor who is tasked with growing my audience. But I believe in doing that by giving people life saving information and debunking dangerous myths and misconceptions around a disease that remains so deeply stigmatized, in part, because of articles like yours on the Kahn case.

Why report on HIV/AIDS housing only to use it to assassinate someone's character? You're missing the real story: that services for low-income New Yorkers with HIV/AIDS (including housing) are being cut severely making thousands of people's lives more unstable and therefore, perilous. I'd love to see the Post have as much sympathy for people who are living with HIV who are at risk of being thrown back into the shelter system or out onto the streets of New York. When this happens, people living with the virus often are unable to take their life saving medications.

As a woman who is living with HIV and who knows first hand the damaging power of HIV stigma, I ask the editors at the New York Post to reconsider your AIDS coverage.

Because if you don't, millions of trees won't be the only thing you have a hand in killing.

The National Minority AIDS Council has condemned this piece.

NY-based Housing Works has condemned this piece.

I'm condemning it.

If you choose to join in the backlash, post a comment here and I'll be sure to pass along your comments to the editors of the New York Post.

Or, write your own letter directly: letters@newyorkpost.com.

OR, call the New York Post's Editor-in-Chief Col Allan at 212.930.8272.

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