NYC’s Public Service Failure

December 17, 2010 By Tim Horn

My fellow bloggers, Oriol Gutierrez and David Capogna, touch upon a very real issue regarding the new public service announcements from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) bent on scaring people into reducing their risk of becoming infected with HIV: The stigmatization of those living with the virus.

View the PSA here:

Public portrayals of HIV are a slippery slope and rarely done correctly. The reason for this is that there is no singular HIV experience. Just as there are undoubtedly people living with HIV who go rock climbing and run marathons after starting antiretroviral therapy, there are also people living with HIV who experience debilitating problems stemming from their medications, their HIV or comorbidities like cancer or hepatitis. There are also people who manage both--physically challenging feats and physically challenging frustrations--and, of course, a vast number of HIV-positive people who generally live the bulk of their lives somewhere between these two extremes.

What we’re left with are highly stylized snapshots intended to characterize the entirety of HIV-positive people’s lives and experiences. The goal? To either manipulate people at risk for HIV into thinking that everything will either be sunshine and daydreams once they get tested and into care, or that living with HIV is fraught with dangers and that it (and by extension, those living with HIV) should be avoided, literally, like the plague.

Well, from a public health perspective, you can’t have it both ways.

Over the past several years, many health departments, HIV organizations and information providers--AIDSmeds and POZ included--have worked independently and collectively to reach the one in five people living with HIV, but remain unaware of their status, with messages of hope without hyperbole. The take-home lesson: HIV is no picnic, but today’s medical advances--including longer and healthier survival--and large number of helpful social services are only possible for those who look beyond the stigma, get tested and enter care.

I fear that DOHMH’s PSA campaign will set this effort back by years. I’m sure I’m not alone in thinking that people who are possibly infected but unaware of their status will think twice about testing for the virus after seeing this PSA. I mean, why test for an infection and knowingly live with media-driven thoughts of horrible manifestations that lay ahead?

While the agency contends the PSAs are only intended for those at risk for HIV, not those living with HIV and unaware of their status, such messages have a funny way of being viewed by those beyond the

intended “target” audience. Even if we had compelling evidence that scare tactics work in terms of preventing diseases--we don’t--we certainly don’t have a way of containing messages.

As my friend Luis Lopez-Detres recently said, “ Nothing says ’don’t get tested’ quite like this ad.”

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