NYT on The Equestrian and HIV

April 12, 2010 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

The media are sometimes taken to task by critics (myself included) for a lack of coverage of HIV/AIDS in general or for unfair and/or inaccurate HIV/AIDS coverage in particular.

So it's nice to be able to point out good examples of HIV/AIDS coverage when they occur.

The New York Times did an excellent job recently with an article by Katie Thomas about Darren Chiacchia.

Until a few months ago, he was mostly known as an equestrian from Ocala, Florida, and an Olympic bronze medalist.

Now, he also is known for being a gay HIV-positive man who was charged with exposing a sexual partner to HIV, which is a felony in Florida.

Here's an excerpt:

> In late January, however, Mr. Chiacchia made headlines of a different sort. He was arrested by the Marion County Sheriff's Office after a former sexual partner accused Mr. Chiacchia of exposing him to H.I.V., the virus that causes AIDS.
>
> Mr. Chiacchia, who pleaded not guilty in February, faces up to 30 years in prison under a Florida law passed in 1997 that makes it a felony for people with H.I.V. to have sexual intercourse without informing their partners of their condition. His trial is scheduled to begin in June,

his lawyer said.

Florida is one of at least 32 states nationwide that have criminal statutes specific to H.I.V., many of which date to the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s, when fear of spreading the disease was at its peak. As the science and treatment of H.I.V. and AIDS have changed considerably in the ensuing decades, fear of infection has subsided. However, the laws remain on the books, and prosecutors continue to enforce them. In Pennsylvania and Louisiana, people with H.I.V. can be sentenced to as much as 10 years in prison for spitting at or biting another person, even though scientists have long concluded that transmitting the virus through saliva is virtually impossible. In Missouri, people can be sentenced to life in prison if they infect others without their knowledge.

Although many of the laws were created in the wake of highly publicized cases in which people exposed dozens of sexual partners, the statutes make little distinction between such extreme situations and more nuanced recent cases like Mr. Chiacchia’s, which involved a

consensual relationship.

Not only is the preferred phrase “people with HIV” used (as opposed to, say, “HIV-infected people”), but the article consistently uses nonjudgmental language and descriptions of a case that in other hands might have easily been saddled with sensationalism.

HIV criminalization is a scary subject for those us living with the virus. Nonetheless, we need to be informed about it. I took no pleasure in reading the details of this case (Chiacchia and his sexual partner have conflicting stories), but I was pleased that this article provided fair and accurate coverage.

The article does use the phrases “infecting” and “people who are infected” later in the piece. Any alternatives such as “transmitting” or “people who have HIV” would have been better, but the article as a whole still works for me.

This article also scores bonus LGBT points. Not until the 11th paragraph--yes, the 11th paragraph--do we find out Chiacchia’s sexual orientation:

> Mr. Chiacchia, 45, and his former partner met on a gay-oriented Web site and began dating in February 2009, according to a statement the partner made to investigators. The relationship ended in June, after his partner said he came across medical documents in Mr. Chiacchia’s home and discovered that Mr. Chiacchia was H.I.V. positive. The man filed a complaint with the Sheriff’s Office in August.

They followed the rule that sexual orientation or gender identity (or any other characteristic like, say, race) should only be included if relevant--and then, only when relevant.

It certainly would have been juicier to include the fact that Chiacchia is gay sooner (like in the first paragraph), so I give them credit for showing such restraint.

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