Scare Tactics in HIV Prevention

January 18, 2011 By Shawn Decker

In case you missed it, an ad for HIV prevention ran in NYC and was met with mixed reactions from the HIV/AIDS community. Here it is:

The “Death Anus” ad, as Sean Strub called it, is obviously aimed at the sexually active extremity of the gay community. You’ll notice within seconds that the NYC Department of Health left no ethnicity out, everyone seems to be represented, their concerned eyes speaking the universal language of fear and anxiety. It’s got a really retro feel, like the commercials and ads that used to run nationwide in the 1980’s, in the days when HIV was considered a death sentence.

This ad is trying to reawaken a community at risk to the dangers of HIV infection. As they say, “It’s Never Just HIV”. But one of the problems I have is that the ad throws positoids under the prevention bus, so to speak. I’m not a fan of prevention messages that make people with HIV feel subhuman, or add to the anxiety that already exists for those with a positive status. But then again, these ads weren’t created to make me feel better about myself, were they?

In my own mission statement, helping those already living with HIV move forward with their lives with dignity is just as important as explaining the reality of living with HIV to those who need to take their own sexual health seriously enough to avoid risky behaviors that could lead to infection. It’s a fine line to walk, but I feel like it can be done effectively. Having written that, would someone who is not taking their sexual health seriously gain anything from reading one of my funny blog entries? Or seeing a picture of me smiling with an iced mocha? Perhaps they’d scoff and say, “See? HIV is no big deal.”

It’s doubtful they’d come across the Death Anus ad, think of their unsafe sexual habits, and have the same reaction.

A question I have is whether or not scaring someone who is at risk will actually lead them to get an HIV test. If I were taking risks and I was worried, I’m not so sure I’d want that reality check. I think that fear is the reason why a lot of people don’t find out they’re HIV positive until they fall ill and are forced to confront the situation head-on. By that point, it is conceivable that others have been put at risk, because you can’t disclose your status if you’re too scared to get tested and have convinced yourself that you’ve “dodged the bullet”.

I’m trying to be understanding of the goals of the Death Anus ad, without just tearing it apart for lack of a better phrase. If it offends a handful of people but ends up saving a few lives, then I guess my uneasiness over them is justified. At the end of the day, I’m just not convinced that scaring people shitless offers real motivation to change behaviors, but I guess- from time to time- it’s worth a try even if

it’s not my personal style or strategy.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

Watch, Friend and Follow me on:
YouTube, Facebook and Twitter
Website: ShawnandGwenn.com Also check out the lovely Gwenn’s Fashion/Coffee Blog
My CD, Synthetic Division, A Symptom of Life, is on iTunes!

SHARE THE BLOG. NOT THE VIRUS.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.