SPITTING MAD

May 20, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

Okay, by now you have likely seen the news reports of the HIV-positive man sentenced on May 14 to 35 years in prison after spitting in the eye and open mouth of a police officer in Dallas, Texas. The jury concluded that the man's saliva could be considered a deadly weapon given his HIV status, despite the fact that there has never been a recorded case of HIV being transmitted through spitting. This is the third time this man, who is homeless, allegedly accosted a police officer with the intent to cause bodily harm. None of the policemen on whom he spit contracted HIV.

I don't know which stuns me more, that the jury came to this conclusion, or the way the American press continues to report these stories WITHOUT clarifying that there is no risk of HIV being transmitted in this manner.

In the original story in The Dallas Morning News (see it here:
http://poz.com/articles/spitting_hiv_sentence_1_14582.shtml
there is no mention of the fact that no one has ever contracted HIV by being spat upon.

In a follow-up story in the Houston Chronicle, they reference a statement issued two days after the conviction by the Dallas County Health Department that said: HIV is typically spread through unprotected sexual contact, sharing needles or through blood transfusion. The officials who issued the statement wrote that they consider "the risk of HIV transmission through saliva and tears to be extremely low." (See that story here: http://poz.com/articles/hiv_spitting_case_1_14621.shtml)

I can not believe that so many years after it has been well established that, regardless of any intent on the part of any one who may think they are using their spit as a "deadly weapon," there is almost no risk whatsoever resulting from the spit of an HIV positive person, the media continues to report these incidents without clarifying the relative risk. Is the media misinformed? Are they reticent to not jump on the "HIV-positive people are bad" bandwagon? Is the lack of balanced and fair reporting a commentary on the state of American journalism? Are we forever going to be relegated to reading sensationalized, incomplete (at best), inaccurate (at worst) reporting about HIV/AIDS?

Given the struggles I have had over the last two years trying to get the mainstream media in the U.S. to rethink the focus of, and increase the volume of, their reporting on HIV/AIDS, I read a story like the one about the man in Texas with total dismay. We need to better educate the American media so that they can help us change the perception of HIV/AIDS. They leave the subject mostly alone, and when they do decide to cover it, they do so without any enlightenment. It's truly frustrating. I am thinking - and would love to hear from you - about tactics we can employ to change the mindsets of producers, editors, publishers and journalists when it comes to covering HIV/AIDS. There are a couple of exceptions...The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and New York magazine know how to write about HIV.

Last night, I was at an awards dinner that celebrated the Global Business Coalition that fights HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria. Sumner Redstone, who runs Viacom, was honored for his commitment to using the family of Viacom media vehicles (including MTV and BET) to raise awareness and educate people about HIV/AIDS. It was clear, hearing him speak, that he is personally knowlegeable and totally committed to wielding his media vehicles to fight AIDS in America.

How do we get others to tune into his channel?

Stay tuned, by the way, for a fun, interactive exercise related to this latest prosecution for spitting in the upcoming July/August issue of POZ!

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