Viral Stigma

March 6, 2013 By Aundaray Guess

Yesterday for a brief moment if you were on the internet you may have seen a blog by me commenting on the news of a man who was being sought by the police for infecting close to 300 people with HIV. This was a news alert that was sent to me by a well known agency in Brooklyn and in my mind it was confirmed when I Googled the information and saw many others who were reporting on the same story. So with the information I did have I penned my thought on the subject making sure those reading the blog were fully aware of the man in question actions. I also found the opportunity to make a statement of what I felt about sex with strangers and whether they would ever self-disclose their status. In my quasi reporting I didn't realize that I was helping someone spread a vicious claim that involved the dispersion of HIV stigma. It was a learning lesson on how viral stigma can be and how quickly it can make it way to others especially in this digital age.

When looking at HIV stigma in a viral form it's no wonder how we can push something out especially when it's inaccurate. Even though we're told at a young age not to believe everything you read, if we see it often enough we start to believe it. Although the Tuskegee experiment has merit it also has grown in the reporting of it as many who were not alive or may not even know the details of the study still use it as their base for why they either don't get tested for HIV or seek treatment. Unfortunately many misinformation of HIV are perpetrated this way and the stigma aspect of it is retained by others.

By writing about this incidence involving the man who infected others with HIV, it was a reality check on the damage that can be done by not fact checking especially when it deals with such a stigmatizing subject. The story was a perfect stigma storm as it had an African-American man infecting others. He was wrongly reported that he used mobile meeting applications such as Grinder and Jack'd and lastly he had sex as an HIV man and was knowingly exposing people to the virus. So there it was, a stigma brew-He was black, having sex and had HIV. Boy those left wingers probably had a field day with this story.

My angle in reporting the information was questioning how 300 people could get exposed to HIV especially with all the health warnings out there in addition asking people to think twice about your sex practice especially when having sex with someone you didn't know. Unlike the creator of this story my intention wasn't to spread misinformation but to help bring to light someone with destructive behaviors utilizing their status as a weapon. But by hitting that enter key I was amongst the chorus who was hoodwinked in attaching an innocent person name and face to something that wasn't true.

What's scary is that someone actually created this story with a purpose. The purpose may

have been to embarrass the individual or this was their form of cyberbully but whatever the reason I have to say I hope you got the satisfaction you were looking for. It must feel good to discredit someone and to vilify those who are actually living with HIV.

This incident showed by stigma going viral it may have the ability to influence those who don't look beyond the headlines of the story. As I write this there are many who still believe the validity of the story and in their viewing it may have simply provided conformation to stereotypical thinking such as HIV is only given by black people and they sleep around. The scariest part is going back and seeing that many blog sites have not provided a retraction in saying that this story is false. We're not talking about little ma and pop bloggers but some major bloggers as well as several known health organizations who sent the info through newsgroups to many who work in the HIV field. And those people as I look at my mailbox also sent out notices and as stated before not one has sent an email to say we made a mistake.

This isn't the first time and probably won't be the last but when looking at HIV and the internet and the way information is pushed out one has to have the ability to critically look at articles and see the truth behind the headlines. In talking about HIV people are looking for perspectives and dialogue on the subject. By reading false information it's akin to being on the school playground and sharing information and by the end of the day the story has transformed into something entirely different and in this digital age it can be transmitted extremely fast.

I still stand by my reporting that new technology that helps others connect quickly and anonymously, caution should be heeded and when protecting your sexual health recognizing that simply asking a stranger or reading on their profile that they're negative shouldn't be your buy in to going raw. I also stand by the fact that when having sex the conversation or main concern should be about HIV but also recognizing the other STDs that are out there. What I do regret is being a tool of false information and the broadcast of a bogus report.

So in further postings I will still use my style in talking about HIV whether its personal or popular news but I'll also take heed of the power of words and the effect it can have especially when you speak on a sometimes stigmatizing subject such as HIV. And before I let my fingers caress the keys and bring forth information it will be fact checked extensively all in my goal to not help stigma go viral.

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