We’re Not “Sufferers” or “Victims”

September 23, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Regan Hofmann, editor in chief of POZ, recently published her memoirs. I Have Something to Tell You details her experience coming to terms with being HIV positive as a straight white woman.

From the product description on Amazon.com:

For ten years, Regan Hofmann lived a double life. To the world, she was a woman from Princeton who went to prep school, summered in the Hamptons and rode Thoroughbred horses. She had a great job, a loving family and friends and looks that made men turn their heads. From the outside, she seemed to have it all. On the inside, though, coursing through her veins and weighing heavily on her mind, was the truth: that she was HIV-positive.

As part of her book promotion, Regan wrote an article for the New York Post about her story. Here’s an excerpt:

How in the world had I let this happen to me? Was I going to die? If I did survive, would anyone want to

touch me? Would I ever have sex again? Could I ever have a child? It was unthinkable to me that despite a good education, awareness of the disease and a lifetime of (mostly) practicing safe sex, that overnight I'd become a card-carrying member of the viral underworld.

The article itself survived the editing process just fine, but the caption of her photo accompanying the article uses an unfortunate phrase:

Regan Hoffman takes pride in running POZ magazine for HIV/AIDS sufferers and sharing her own story of coping with illness.

I'm sure the caption editors meant well, but we who are living with HIV/AIDS are not "sufferers" or "victims" or anything similar. Such phrasing is to be avoided.

Here's the entry on AIDS from the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA) stylebook:

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, a medical condition that compromises the human immune system, leaving the body defenseless against opportunistic infections. Some medical treatments can slow the rate at which the immune system is weakened. Do not use the term "full-blown AIDS." Individuals may be HIV-

positive but not have AIDS. Avoid terms such as “AIDS sufferer” and “AIDS victim” because they imply powerlessness. Use “people with AIDS” or, if the context is medical, “AIDS patients.”

Such phrasing does indeed imply powerlessness, but it is also just inaccurate. People with AIDS are no more “suffering” or “victimized” by HIV than any other human is by any other potentially lethal virus. I love drama, but even I can’t stomach phrasing so full of it.

I had hoped such phrasing was extinct, but as the persistence of the phrase "HIV virus" proves, some phrases just linger. In a recent Google News search of “AIDS sufferer” and “AIDS victim” (also in plural form), I got back more than 300 results.

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