Witches, Virgins, Lorikeets and Bandicoots

August 2, 2007 By Regan Hofmann

We left Australia Sunday morning (Aussie time) and flew through two sunrises, one sunset, across the international dateline from today into yesterday and from the southern to the northern hemisphere to arrive in Los Angeles four hours before we left Sydney. We then sat trapped on the departure side of security at LAX (LA?s international airport) for 16 hours while two planes we were supposed to ride home were deemed unsafe to fly. I don?t know what?s worse: the surreal jet lag (amplified by massive fatigue and a slight hangover?because after thirty hours of travel, you have to have a glass of wine?) or the culture shock of re-entry to the U.S.

Don?t get me wrong. I love America. I practically kissed the ground at JFK when we finally touched

down in New York. But it is amazing how loud and disheveled we can seem compared to people in cultures overseas. Also, we are so out for ourselves. Sean and I were not seated together on the last leg of the trip, so we asked if people minded reshuffling. One old man wagged his finger disapprovingly and said no way was he giving up his window seat. Another just ignored us completely. Finally, a young Asian woman offered her seat?

When our second plane was canceled, and it was announced that we had to go to customer service to try to secure the next ride home, people stampeded past one another. One guy was screaming into two cell phones at once while he elbowed past a young mother trying frantically to steer a baby carriage laden with siblings while she sprinted through the airport. I wanted to help her out?but I also didn?t want to spend another 16 hours at LAX. The phrase ?kill or be killed? kept flowing through my mind. In the end, for all the high-speed dialing and rude maneuvering, the guy with the tandem phones took the same plane?hours later?that we were on. As he walked down the aisle past us, I secretly hoped that they?d sat him next to the two little kids who, like the rest of us, were completely at the end of their ropes. I have to admit, I missed the Zen-like flow of the crowds on scooters, motorcycles and bikes in Viet Nam who deferentially swerve around you as long as you don?t stop suddenly, or accelerate wildly. If I learned anything on this trip it?s the importance of patience and the power of forging ahead smoothly through life without trying to stand your ground, or run anyone over in the process of trying to get where you are going.

We saw our third sun-up sans sleep (because the red-eye from LA actually took off a.m. time in Australia) while on the final plane. Watching the edge of space turn crimson from 36,000 feet is a life-affirming sight. The glow of first light above the clouds is so different from the one we see from earth. It seemed fitting to close out the life-changing 22-day trip watching a new day break over the bow of the planet. It reminded me of a blast of morning light I saw several years ago. I was traveling to see my family and had survived a particularly nasty take-off in stormy skies around Houston. As the plane pitched and bucked, I remember feeling that I?d be so disappointed in myself if I died before fulfilling my promise to myself that some day I?d do something about AIDS. When the plane pierced the bright sunny sky that always sits above the darkest rain clouds, I told myself that as soon as I could, I?d get on the activist wagon. It took a little while, but I did it. And the peaceful pink dawn we saw days ago seemed a sign from nature that I was on the right path.

Okay, enough Hallmark.

Let?s talk witches and virgins.

Two reasons I am glad (and proud) to be an American: 1) we do not call people living with HIV witches, and hunt them down and kill them and 2) we do not believe that sleeping with a virgin will protect you from HIV.

Just before leaving Australia, I read the report that more than 500 HIV-positive women have been beaten or killed by mobs of people in Papua New Guinea (PNG) who claim the women are witches who have ?cursed the Pacific island nation?s younger generation with AIDS.? The main evidence, according to one report, is that the HIV-positive women ?walk differently from others.? After

having spent several days listening to local authorities in Australia brag about how they have minimized the rate of HIV infection in Australia and how they intend to play a pivotal role in supporting Southeast Asia keep their AIDS epidemics under control AND having talked personally with Maura Elaripe Mea an HIV-positive woman from PNG (see the interview on the IAS conference coverage page), I was flabbergasted to hear that HIV-positive women are being murdered on an island so close to Australia.

Last Thursday night, I was a guest on ABC Radio National?s ?Australia Talks,? a national radio show, along with Australia?s Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer (who recently upped Australia?s AIDS funding from $400 million to $1 billion), Bill Bowtell, director of the HIV/AIDS Project at the Lowy Institute for International Policy and Dr. Patricia Fagan. Dr. Fagan commented that there have been no reported cases of HIV in the Torres Straits?the body of water filled with tiny islands that sits between Australia and PNG. It seemed from her report that the HIV infections on PNG were going to stay contained there. There was no mention of the witch-hunts nor reference to the supposed threat of micro-chipping that HIV-positive Papua New Guineans currently face (Is this insane? Human Rights Watch we need you!). During the show, two of the live callers furthered my fear that what the top brass was saying about HIV prevention in Australia (and the surrounding region) might not dovetail with the realities there. One caller suggested government prevention campaigns should not be focusing on messaging about condoms but rather, focusing on how to teach and help people be monogamous. Another caller reminded the live listening audience that there are many in Southeast Asia who believe that HIV can be prevented if you sleep with a virgin. When I hear comments like these, I know we have a lot of work to do, even in parts of the world where the HIV infection rate seems, for the moment, to be contained. While Australia has unquestionably done a great job on the prevention front, I wonder whether what has worked on that continent will translate to cultures near in geography but far away in terms of cultural similarity. It also struck me that no matter where you are in the world the same issues continue to rear their heads as impediments to good AIDS prevention. There are the religiously conservative who thwart condom distribution and education about real-world safe sex, there are massive power imbalances that make it difficult for women (both with and without HIV) to protect themselves, and there are superstitions and deep-seated cultural beliefs that fly in the face of science-based evidence.

We need a team of cultural specialists who can find the root source of these grossly incorrect notions (AIDS witches and anti-AIDS virgins) and get on an informational and diplomatic cultural mission to clear up these heinous misperceptions and thus protect women-who-would-otherwise-be-seen-as-witches and people-who-would-like-to-remain-virgins.

While I am duly impressed by Australia?s track record so far with controlling AIDS, I fear that they are in an era of AIDS complacency that could lead to a surge in new infections (particularly in groups who don?t think they?re at risk). Ask an Australian on the street whether he or she thinks they?re at risk for HIV. They?ll likely tell you it?s a disease that only gay men and IDUs get. This amazes me. I am morbidly fascinated that people think whole segments of the populace live in bubbles. As if gay men and IDUs never came into contact with people outside their social/sexual arenas. This naïve thinking is the very reason that AIDS has spread into every element of western

society. It?s all too convenient to say ?I?m not gay and I?m not an IDU so therefore I don?t have to worry about AIDS.? Even with vigilant and widespread testing it can take time for the reality of who is infected to synch up with the stats about who has HIV. I?m not entirely convinced that any nation knows the extent of its real AIDS caseload. Australia?s Prime Minister John Howard has plans to keep HIV out of Australia by keeping HIV-positive people from coming into the country. While this is one way to try to minimize the load of HIV-positive people on Australia?s national healthcare system, it doesn?t account for those who are positive and don?t yet know it in Australia, nor Australian citizens who travel to Southeast Asia and may bring HIV back with them. I think this is part of the reason why Australia is committed to fighting HIV in the region?and that?s great. But before they start micro-chipping HIV-positive people in Papua New Guinea, perhaps they should consider setting up some consequences for those who hunt witches and pay top dollar to sleep with children forced into the sex trade by the demand for their virgin bodies as protection against AIDS. Or at least launch an educational campaign directed at busting those myths.

I was also on two other radio shows while in Australia, and while I was glad for the airtime and the opportunity to spread the word that HIV can happen to anyone, I was a little disappointed that the questions were so focused on the personal, prurient details of how I contracted HIV and my diagnosis. I wonder why people need to ask, ?How did you FEEL when you found out you had HIV?? ?Were you afraid you would die?? (Answers: Terrified, of course. Yes, of course.) It was all so very 1982. I know that many mainstream media people aren?t that up on AIDS 2007, but come on now?can?t we stay in the present and not always go back and harp on two days in a lifetime of HIV? (Namely, the day I got HIV and the day I found out I had it.) It peeves me a little that media constantly wants to focus on the dark side of HIV. I get that there aren?t that many people out there speaking so publicly about having HIV?but I wish we didn?t have to talk about the details of my life as opposed to what POZ is doing to combat AIDS. Let?s talk a little less about how people got HIV (unless we?re talking prevention) and more about how they can survive it and thrive in spite of it. So much of the media coverage perpetuates the stigma. By remaining ensconced in stereotypical images of HIV, we fail to paint a more up-to-date picture. There is drama throughout a positive person’s life--and there is much more to my life than HIV.

The final day in Australia I met with an incredible group of men who represented the Who?s Who of AIDS in Australia, from Rob Lake, who is the CEO of People Living with HIV/AIDS (New South Wales) to Michael Badorrek, the media and communications manager from the AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON) to Glenn Flanagan the editor of Talkabout--POZ’s Aussie equivalent, among others. We were also joined by Craig McClure who is the executive director of the International AIDS Society (they put on the international AIDS conferences).We chatted about how to better link people living with HIV, both in Australia and around the world, and I shared what POZ has been doing. We commiserated about the challenges of finding funding to get our information out to as many people as possible and they asked a lot of questions about how we manage our relationships with pharma advertisers. (Did you know that the pharmaceutical companies can?t advertise directly to Australian consumers?) It was so great to know that we can support each other?and our readers?by linking everyone via the web. Stay tuned for some links to Australia?

Finally, it was time for one more walkabout before leaving gorgeous Australia. Sean and I headed

to Watson?s Bay by jet cat (a high-speed ferry) and walked along, and beneath, the massive cliffs that flank the main entrance to Sydney Harbor. We saw rainbow colored lorikeets (bright, wild parrots) drinking the nectar of flowering trees, pretty tide pools with sea urchins, fish that glinted like tiny shards of silver in the shallow pools, and weird starfish and snails that wait patiently for the tides to return. I found the remains of a long-nosed bandicoot (a creature that looks like a cross between a rabbit and a squirrel and that is, technically, a marsupial about the size of a cat) and resisted my urge to add its skeleton to my collection. Not only would I have been stopped at customs; I was worried they might think I was a witch.

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