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Life and Death in the Fast Lane -A New AIDS Crisis

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Friday, February 25, 2005

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The medical report became a catalyst for controversy within the homosexual community and doctors involved in fighting AIDS. In one sense, this new controversy is reminiscent of the debate within the gay community during the early years of the AIDS crisis—a debate over promiscuity among gay males and charges that the dominant “heterosexualist” culture was using AIDS as a cover for shutting down the institutions of gay culture.

During the 1980s, public health authorities responded to the AIDS epidemic by attempting to shut down gay bathhouses in urban areas. On both coasts, the bathhouse culture had become an institutionalized form of promiscuity, with men exchanging anonymous sex, sometimes with multiple partners in a single night.

Given the nature of the H.I.V. virus, the bathhouse scene became a prime focus of efforts to limit the spread of the disease. Incredibly, some gay advocates opposed the elimination of the bathhouses as an assault upon homosexuals themselves. Others went so far as to argue that promiscuity is essential to the authentic homosexual experience. Now, similar arguments have reemerged in the wake of reports indicating that this new form of H.I.V. may be even more dangerous than the strains previously encountered.

The New York Times has given considerable attention to this issue, publishing several articles which have dealt with various aspects of this new discovery.

According to the paper’s reports, the new strain of H.I.V. was first detected last December when a gay man in his 40’s tested positive for the virus. According to a report published in the February 13, 2005 edition of the paper, “Investigators believe he may have contracted the virus in October when he engaged in unprotected . . . sex with multiple partners while using crystal methamphetamine.” The virulent nature of this strain became evident when the man did not respond to at least three of the four classes of anti-retroviral drugs commonly used against H.I.V. Beyond this, the man appeared to be developing full-blown AIDS, was losing weight, and seemed to have a high level of the virus in his bloodstream.

Public health officials responded with alarm, noting that the emergence of this new strain was particularly fearsome because of the fact that many gay men have been returning to the patterns of promiscuous sexual behavior that had marked gay life before the arrival of the AIDS crisis.

Of course, press reports centered on the issue of condoms. Reporter Andrew Jacobs introduced a report on the gay debate by noting, "After all the thousands of AIDS deaths and all the years of 'Safe Sex is Hot Sex' prevention messages, it has come down to this: many gay men who know the rules of engagement in the age of AIDS are not using condoms. As news of a potentially virulent strain of H.I.V. settles in, gay activists and AIDS prevention workers say they are dismayed and angry that the 25-year-old battle against the disease might have to begin all over again."

Jacobs went on to report that some health authorities have focused on a surge in methamphetamine use among homosexuals and now propose to "track down those who knowingly engage in risky behavior and try to stop them before they can infect others."

As Jacobs admits, this is seen as a radical idea among many homosexuals. The health authorities have a plan, and it is indeed "born of desperation," as Jacobs reports. "Although gay advocates and health care workers are just beginning to talk about how this might be done, it could involve showing up at places where impromptu sex parties happen and confronting the participants. Or it might mean infiltrating web sites that promote gay hookups and thwarting liaisons involving crystal meth," Jacobs reported.

But Walt Odets, a psychologist and gay advocate, dismissed such ideas of intervention as "a witch hunt." Author of *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS*, Odets suggested that depression among gay men was the underlying reason for promiscuous sexual behavior. He suggested that this would all go away if society would accept gay relationships.

"Let's not freak out," one participant in an on-line gay forum urged. Another simply offered, "Use protection, steer clear of party drugs, and encourage your friends to do the same. This is no time to freak out—it's just time to sober up."

According to reporter Damien Cave, although gay Internet websites acknowledge the emergence of this new strain of H.I.V., "some of the most popular gay dating and discussion sites buzzed with the usual banter of love and lust, with many of those online advising against panic."

In a separate article, reporters Benedict Carey and Anhad O'Connor indicated that health officials face a tougher task than many had expected. "Researchers say that several factors outside their control have made such public health efforts harder than ever. The antiretroviral drugs that have extended the lives of so many people with AIDS have also tempered the dread of catching the virus, they say, especially among a younger generation of gay men who have not known the agony of watching friends die of the disease." Furthermore, "Many men now search for and find casual sex partners on the Internet, bypassing bars and other central meeting places where public health workers traditionally have reached people. And especially among gay men, the drug crystal methamphetamine has become associated with casual sex for some men. Some experts suspect that methamphetamine may also increase a person's susceptibility to infection by suppressing immune function."

In other words, the association of gay sex and the use of crystal methamphetamine is linked to the spread of the H.I.V. virus. Medical authorities are divided over the function of "crystal meth" in this transmission. Some believe that the drug may actually compromise the body's immune system and ability to ward off the virus. Most seem to believe that the major impact of the drug is behavioral, with the use of methamphetamine lowering whatever inhibitions may limit sexual promiscuity.

The paper reported that crystal meth "has made deep inroads around the country in recent years, and in much of the nation's midsection it has supplanted cocaine and heroine as the biggest drug problem." Medical authorities point to the emergence of "sexual marathons" that are associated with methamphetamine use and have become popular in some homosexual circles.

Dennis DeLeon, President of the Latino Commission on AIDS, suggested that homosexual men using methamphetamine may commonly have sex with upwards of ten to twenty partners in one night. "It is a drug where they just lose count," he explained.

The Times was quick to assert: "Most gay men do not engage in such behavior, nor is it limited to gays. But medical history has shown repeatedly that a small number of infected people can sow an epidemic."

The medical danger has caught the attention of New York City's mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who described a failure to guard against transmission of H.I.V. as a "sin." Addressing the new reports, the Mayor said: "It's just a sin in our society, where we know how it's transmitted from one person to another, and we should be able to get people to conduct themselves such that they don't catch it themselves, and certainly that they don't infect anyone else."

Some older homosexual men indicated particular concern about the risky behavior of younger gays. This concern appears to be fully warranted, as some young gays disregard medical advice and engage in high-risk sexual behavior. Oliver Palan, a 19-year-old student at Baruch College, told the paper that he had "slept with" ten men in the recent past without taking any steps to prevent the transmission of the H.I.V. virus. "So many people are like, 'It is so much more fun without the condom,' so they prefer to take the risk."

Some medical authorities fear that the emergence of retroviral drugs has lulled some homosexuals into a false sense of security. Michael Justiniano of Park Slope, Brooklyn, reflected, "I have spoken to young kids, sometimes here, who say, 'If I get it, it's no big deal. I can just take a pill.' I'm like, 'Are you stupid?' It is so disgusting. I find it really disturbing."

All this points to the deep moral rebellion that lies at the heart of gay culture. It would be unfair to assert that all homosexuals engage in the kind of high-risk behavior identified in these articles. Nevertheless, the failure of homosexuals to police such activities indicates an incredible moral ambivalence that is, in itself, most revealing.

The myth of "safe sex" has emerged as one of the great lies of this generation. First of all, it insinuates that the only moral risk involved in sexual promiscuity—heterosexual or homosexual—is the spread of disease. Of course, the greater danger is the damage to the soul that inevitably results from engaging in what God has declared to be sinful behavior. There is no "safe sex" outside of heterosexual marriage, and salvation will never come in the form of a condom.

Reports of this new and potentially virulent strain of H.I.V. should awaken the Christian community to the urgency of our task in telling the truth about homosexuality and our responsibility to reach out to homosexuals with the only message that will genuinely save. These reports should serve, not only as a wake up call for the homosexual community, but as an important signal of Christian responsibility.

