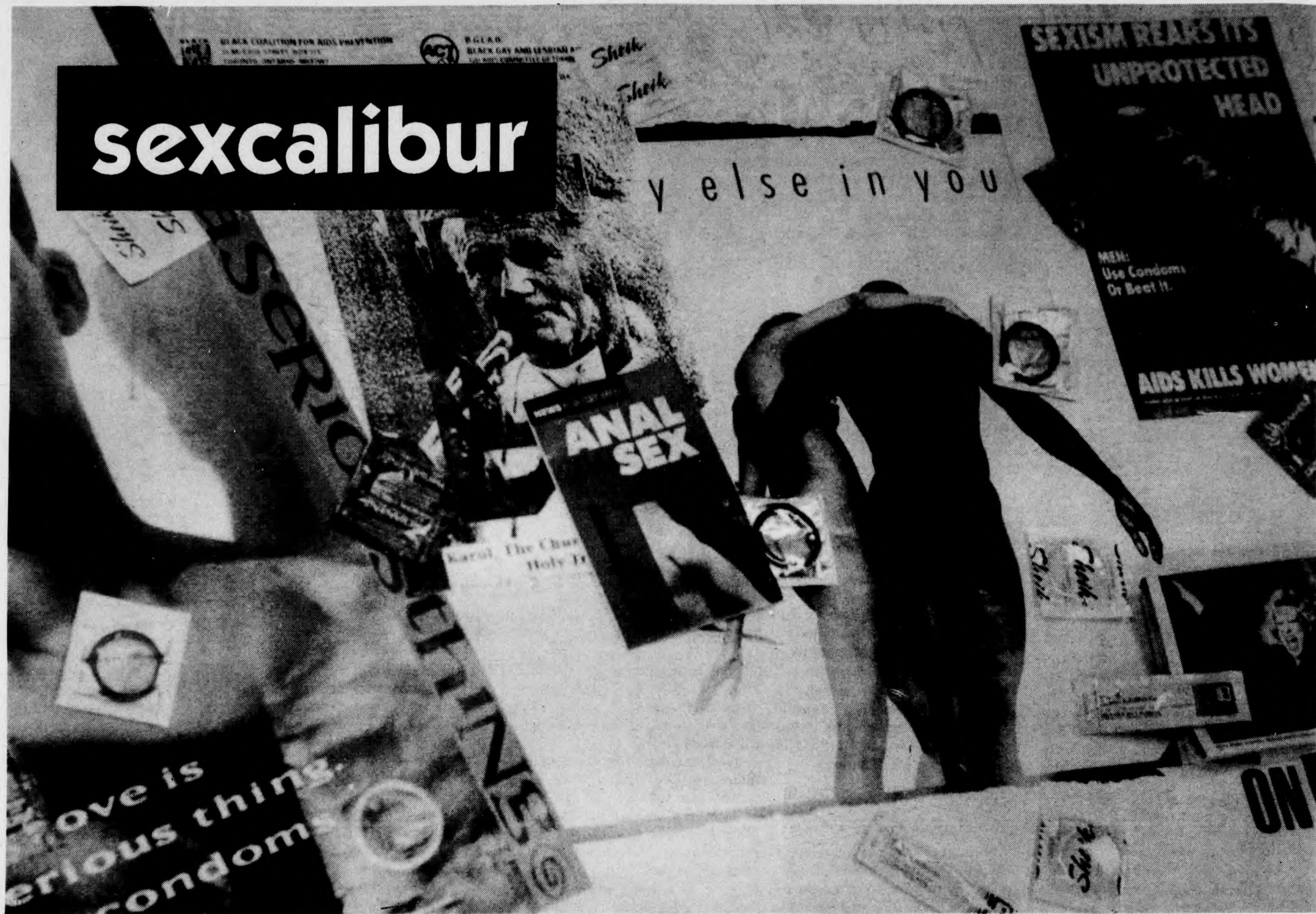


# sexcalibur



## How safe sex turned into anti-sex

*I'm getting weighed down  
With all this information  
Safe sex doesn't mean no sex,  
It just means use your imagination*

Billy Bragg, "Sexuality"

by Jan Darby

**A**s Billy Bragg points out, there is a plethora of safe sex advice floating around in the popular media. It seems you can hardly pick up a magazine or turn on the radio or TV without coming across yet another set of safe sex guidelines.

All safe sex advice is not created equal, however. It is clear we're living through a strong political swing to the right. With increasing conservatism comes a return to what the media often call "traditional values," prevalent among which are anti-sex attitudes. In this age of AIDS, sexual repression may come in the guise of disease prevention. And of course, it's all "for our own good."

In fact, even the term "safe sex" is under dispute. There are those who argue that "safer sex" is the more accurate term, as sexual contact cannot be absolutely risk-free. To assume all sex is inherently risky or unsafe presupposes a very narrow definition of "sex," encompassing only penetrative vaginal, anal or oral intercourse.

On the other hand, the AIDS committee of Toronto lists the following activities as "Totally Safe Sex:" kissing on the mouth, licking skin or nipples touching yourself, touching the skin of your partner; fantasy and make believe.

How do we sort out sound guidelines for preventing the spread of STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases) from mere puritanism? First, consider the source. Safe sex often appears to be just good common sense. Consequently, everyone and her aunt has started to dole out their opinions on the subject.

Following a Montreal doctor's statement that a woman who died of AIDS claimed to have had intercourse with over 50 NHL players, hockey players have begun to pontificate on the subject of "safe sex". Russ Courtnall of the Montreal Canadiens reacted to this news by stating that people should not engage in pre-marital sex, and claimed that society was losing its morals.

What do marriage and morality have to do with the prevention of AIDS? Nothing, really. But Russ Courtnall

and Pope John Paul would have you believe that a marriage certificate and a halo are more effective than a condom.

Even the Divine Miss M, Bette Midler, seems to have lost her bawdy enthusiasm for sexual freedom, and was recently heard telling Oprah Winfrey that, given the AIDS epidemic, people have to stop going "from partner to partner to partner". She went on to relate the fate of two nannies whom she had hired who had developed cervical cancer because, Bette claimed, they had had sexual intercourse before the age of 18.

Well, perhaps anyone who looks to singers, hockey players or the Pope for advice on sexuality and disease prevention deserves what they get. Yet the advice coming from health professionals is often little better.

In a recent edition of the Bethune College *Lexicon*, Dr. P.R. Braude of the York Lanes medical centre attempts to dispel "a number of misconceptions concerning genital herpes."

Dr. Braude suggested that herpes could be avoided by practising this regime of "safer sex:" "1. Do not have physical contact with anyone who has sores/blisters on the mouth or genitals; 2. [Have] only one sexual partner who does not have any infection. 3. KNOW your partner well. Don't be afraid to ask your partner about their sexual history, past infections etc. 4. Encourage the use of latex condoms."

As disease prevention, such advice is not only ludicrous, it's downright dangerous. If we were to take guideline #1 seriously, people with genital herpes and even those with cold sores (Herpes Simplex Type 1) would become social pariahs. As long as one does not touch herpes lesions directly, or come into contact with the pus from these sores, transmission of the virus is unlikely.

Guideline #2 is the old monogamy myth. *You* may not be fooling around, but unless you keep your partner on a leash (which I do not advocate), you can never be certain that your partner is also monogamous. Unilateral monogamy is not safe sex.

As for choosing a partner who does not have any infection, well, people with STDs do not come with convenient labels. (Although I actually heard someone on a CBC radio phone-in show make the truly offensive suggestion that people who are HIV positive should be compelled to have this information tattooed on their genitals.)

Even if you are an STD-free virgin who finds another, very honest STD-free virgin with whom to have a monogamous sexual relationship, your safe sex worries do not disappear. Relationships can and do end. Even marriages. What then? A convent or monastery? Remember, when John Lennon and Yoko Ono dubbed themselves "Two Virgins," they were *joking*.

Guideline #3 sounds more like Russian Roulette than safe sex. The only question regarding a partner's sexual history that could be relevant is "Have you ever had unprotected intercourse?" But people lie. All the time. Especially about sex! Do you really want to trust your health to someone else's word? "Hey baby, I'm clean, *honest!*"

Guideline #4: latex condoms. Perhaps Dr. Braude had the list upside down. Using condoms should be top of the list. Don't just "encourage" their use, *use them* for all penetrative intercourse, whether vaginal, anal or oral. For oral sex on a woman, split them up the side and spread them flat to use as a barrier between the mouth and the vulva.

Clearly, Dr. Braude's so-called "safer sex" guidelines have more to do with the author's assumptions regarding the appropriate moral conduct of university students than with effective disease prevention. Yet, Dr. Braude is not alone among the medical community in disseminating sexual repression propaganda in the form of safe sex guidelines.

The most outrageous example of this type of anti-sex polemic I have encountered is a scare-mongering book entitled "Genital Warts and Contagious Cancers: The Coming Epidemic," by Julie Alvey. Alvey lists Gary B. Sullivan, M.D. as "Technical Advisor" for the book.

Despite this technical medical advice, Alvey seems more concerned with morality than disease prevention. Alvey makes the outrageous claim that "The best method of preventing an HPV [genital wart] infection is total abstinence from sex until a monogamous long-term relationship is developed. Extramarital affairs can be deadly in this era of AIDS and the HPV. Cheating can literally kill a couple".

Alvey also warns that "Nonliving material like plastic dildos can spread the HPV and AIDS virus. If sex toys are used during sexual activity, they should never be shared with a third person or another couple". Alvey's prurient concern with the dangerous depravity of the dildo use and group sex is really unnecessary. Simply washing sex toys with soap and water between uses will kill any STD organisms.

Given all the useless moralizing disguised as safe sex advice, how can you recognize good guidelines for the prevention of STDs?

First, effective safe sex information needs to be explicit. If the author can't bear to talk about sex except in coy euphemisms, they probably have a very repressive perspective on the issue of sexuality. Vague language only leads to confusion.

Second, good safe sex advice must recognize and discuss the diversity of sexual behaviour that people really do

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