

BLOOD & THUNDER

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The curator of the Exhibition, Dr. J. Miller, states that it is "aimed at heightening public awareness of the often covert advertising strategies designed to reinforce deep-rooted prejudices against social groups stigmatized by the epidemic itself, and by the epidemic of publicity attending it." The exhibition contains some of the best AIDS Posters, and some of the worst. The viewer is challenged to consider the images and their political agendas, as well as their implications about the social realities of AIDS. These posters come from a wide variety of sources, from the official government agencies of some countries, to community based groups who are attempting to reach particular groups of people. The political agenda, and context of each organization is evident as you view the message they have chosen to represent. It there is a message that Mr. Valk believes should be advertised he is welcome to make a poster that represents what he believes should be the essential message for prevention of AIDS. His efforts will be understood in the context of his value structure political agenda, and knowledge about AIDS.

His information is incorrect in regard to the efficacy of condoms. They do not have a high failure rate if used properly. Studies have shown that they are about 97% effective if

used alone. When combined with a substance containing Nonoxol-9, they are in the range of 99% safe. While there is no disputing that they have a margin of error, I believe that 97% less chance of being infected is much better than having no protection.

If Mr. Valk had read the inserts that come with condoms, he would know that acknowledgement of the risk is always included. For example, one company says "although no prophylactic or contraceptive can guarantee 100% effectiveness, _____ condoms when properly used, may prevent the transmission of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy - - However, its use cannot totally eliminate the risk of acquiring these diseases. Condoms are primarily intended for use in vaginal intercourse; other uses can increase the potential for breakage." Instructions about how to use condoms properly is always included in condom boxes. The AIDS Awareness Program at UNB Spends considerable time at every presentation teaching students about how to use condoms correctly.

I do not know where Mr. Valk found the study about the infection rate between a couple, where one member is infected and the other not. In fact, this is about the rate if the couple never use a condom. Many

other studies that were presented at the Seventh International Conference on AIDS, as well as published in reputable journals have found that if a couple always uses a condom there has been no transmission of HIV through sexual intercourse. It is always wise to check with someone who knows the literature before referring to an isolated study as the truth. Only as repeated studies find the same kind of evidence can we feel secure that the study results are believable. The only protection we currently have available is to educate people to protect themselves if they choose to be sexually active. The action of Mr. Valk in giving incorrect and misleading information undoes some of what we have achieved in convincing individuals that they can be effective in protecting their health, and that it is worth the effort. Mr. Valk has told them that they don't need to bother because it won't help anyway. I would challenge the morality of this behaviour, on the part of a helping person.

I object to the slurs on the credibility of those individuals who are engaged in AIDS education, when Mr. Valk states that "once speaking of 'safe sex' they now more honestly mention only safer sex". At UNB, we have always used the term safer sex. In fact, it has been my experience that those who involved with

any community based AIDS organization especially if a member of the Canadian AIDS Society have always acknowledged that there is some risk in sexual activity, even when condoms are used.

I was offended by his statement that AIDS Awareness Groups are "preaching the condom line, but ignoring or softpeddling the moral line." I do not believe it is the role of any AIDS education program to preach about morality. Our task is to inform individuals so that if in their own moral judgement, they choose to be sexually active, they can then protect themselves from life-threatening repercussions. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that fear tactics do not work. People do not stop having unprotected sex, because you threaten them with illness, or pregnancy, or even eternal damnation. On the other hand, if they have chose to be sexually active, you can help them protect their health if they are informed about the risks, and safer sex in a positive manner.

The statistics that Mr. Valk refers to re increasing numbers of students abstaining are not confirmed by any of the multitude of studies about the sexual behaviour of students. There are some that describe increasing numbers of gay men who practice safer sex, and who have decreased their numbers of sexual partners. That

is not true for the heterosexual student population.

Finally, I was saddened by his need to blame those people who are grappling with this infection and the stigmatization that comes with it. His actions have prevented these students from being able to go to him for spiritual counselling, while they deal with the grief and loss this virus infection brings. Moreover, his blaming comments have reinforced those of a proportion of our society who believe that gay men deserve to die, and therefore it is alright to bash them, or to degrade them. If in his moral judgement this is acceptable behaviour, then I hope he will take responsibility for the pain that will result for vulnerable individuals.

I would welcome Mr. Valk's contribution in terms of helping people clarify their values around sexuality and consider their own moral beliefs about their sexual choices. I hope that it can be done in a more constructive manner in the future.

Grace Getty
Associate Professor
Coordinator of the UNB
AIDS Program

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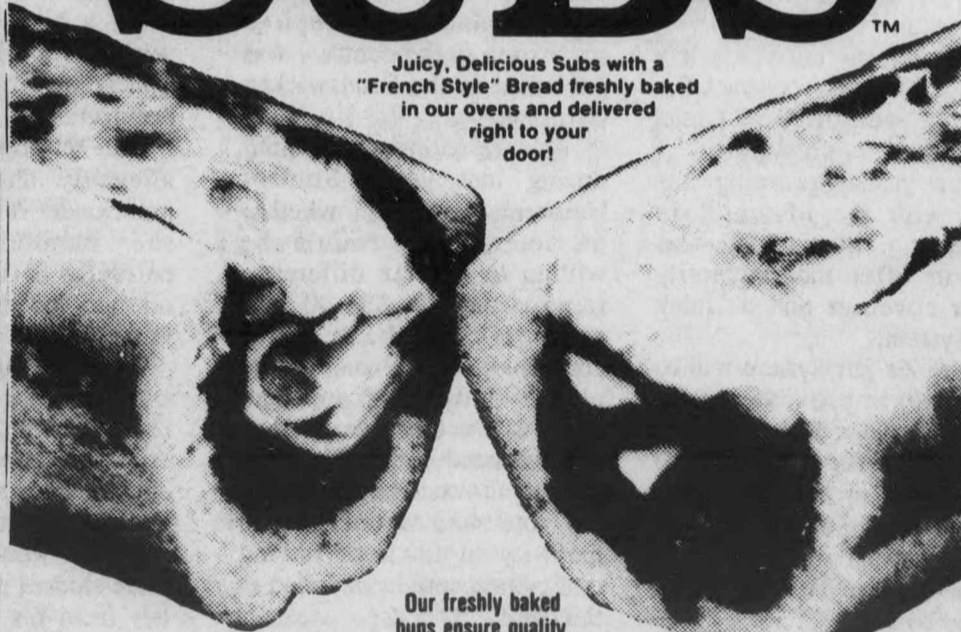
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