



Stop the vilification

By Joshua Lynsen
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I support the fight against HIV/AIDS. I want an informed discussion. And I expect our next president will develop a national plan to combat this crisis.

But as part of this fight, as part of this discussion and as part of this plan, I demand an end to the hurtful and ill-informed vilification of bisexual men.

The most recent attack on bisexuals came this week from Washington Post columnist Courtland Milloy. In an article tied to the 20th anniversary of World AIDS Day and admirably intended to encourage frank discussion about the crisis, Milloy distracts from his thesis by repeating painfully inaccurate stereotypes. He maligns bisexual men, repeatedly blaming us for transmitting HIV from gay to straight Americans.

He advises a fictional "Widow Jones" to take heed "that her new dude is on the down low — surreptitiously having sex with men — then bringing it to bed with her," and says among "the primary modes of transmission" of AIDS are "bisexual men posing as heterosexuals and outright dogs who make a sport of sexual conquest."

I was disappointed to see the Washington Post let slip this misinformation on the front page of its metro section. And I wasn't alone.

Darlene Nipper, a former executive director of the Black Entertainment Television Network Foundation and one-time head of the D.C. Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Affairs, chided Milloy in her role as deputy executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force.

"Courtland Milloy is correct that all sexual relationships should be framed by honesty and openness about sexual histories," she said. "We all need to practice safer sex to prevent the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. But his slur against bisexual men, whom he categorically charges with dishonesty and unethical behavior, is outrageous, inexcusable and untrue. Bisexual men have borne the brunt of this defamation for too long and the demonization of bisexual identities must stop. The HIV/AIDS crisis is bad enough without Milloy's scurrilous and inflammatory rhetoric against bisexual people."

Neil Giuliano, president of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, also took issue with Milloy's column.

"It's disappointing to see misinformation about the so-called 'down low' repeated in the pages of the Washington Post," Giuliano said. "The lack of reliable statistics about rates of transmission

among bisexual men make Milloy's claims especially dubious. It's unfortunate that when given such a far-reaching platform to address such an urgent issue, he perpetuated myths about bisexual men that only serve to promote misunderstanding and fear."

Had he spent more time investigating facts than mongering fear, Milloy might have found a 1997 paper from the Institute for Health Policy Studies and others that reviewed the number of HIV infections transmitted annually from bisexual men in high-risk U.S. cities to their female sex partners. The finding? "This number represents about 1 percent of the number of HIV infections thought to occur annually in the USA," the paper says. Although an inexact science, the paper notes it is just as likely that the findings underestimate as overestimate the role of bisexual men in the spread of HIV.

For the record, the paper's lead author is James Kahn, and it can be retrieved online at www.aidsonline.com. I provide this information so that you might review the paper if you wish. Milloy, who cites unsourced figures in his column, does not afford his readers this luxury.

To be clear, I agree with Milloy insofar that Americans must talk more frankly about the HIV/AIDS crisis. To become more knowledgeable about this crisis is to become more powerful against it. And in this desperate fight, we need all the power we can get.

Milloy does himself and his readers a disservice, though, by scapegoating people and reducing the fight against HIV/AIDS to something approaching an us-versus-them mindset. Any notion that straight women can keep themselves safe from HIV infection by shunning bisexual men — the inferred line that I and others fear Milloy's readers took away from his column — is egregiously prejudiced and hopelessly ignorant.

"Everyone has to be responsible to protect themselves whether they are men, women, straight, gay, bisexual, or an injection drug user," said Carl Schmid, director of federal affairs at the AIDS Institute. "I don't think it is good to be trying to place blame on anyone. We need to educate everyone and try to change people's behavior so they do not transmit the virus to others or put themselves at risk of contracting the virus."

Rather than point fingers, Milloy, let us work together to curtail if not end the spread of HIV/AIDS. And rather than espouse stereotypes, let us work together to understand if not accept people who are different than us.

"To scapegoat the rise of HIV/AIDS infections on someone simply because of their sexuality is irresponsible," said Brad Luna, communications director for the Human Rights Campaign. "Creating a society where more people are able to live an open and honest life is what is needed and commentary such as Mr. Milloy's only further stigmatizes and stereotypes people."