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[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

S P E C T A T O R SPECTRUM

Unsafe sex affects gays, too

**Daniel
Krisch**

Welcome to the morning-after AIDS hysteria. All across the United States, gay men are waking up, shaking their heads as if to wipe

away the foggy, dark memory of some particularly brutal nightmare, and getting on with their lives. After all, it is 1995—and after 13 years of awareness, 13 years of self-protection, and 13 years of heartrending grief, it finally seems safe for them to let down their defenses a little bit. Unfortunately, this also means

that, in ever-increasing numbers, gay men are once again having unprotected sex—and it means

that, in ever-increasing numbers, gay men are

becoming infected with HIV.

It means that, in ever-increasing numbers, gay men are dying.

As things stand right now, the morning after in the gay community seems destined instead

to become the second wave of the AIDS epidemic—and this second wave has the potential to be even more deadly than the first.

All of this was detailed in a segment on this past Sunday's "60 Minutes," which perhaps for the first time gave mainstream America (myself included) a glimpse of the mid-1990s rebirth of the transmission of AIDS among homosexual men. From the late 1980s—when fear made the use of condoms and/or abstinence a byword among gays, and when the reported number of new AIDS cases in their slice of the population dropped almost to zero—vigilance has slipped so alarmingly of late that the current rate of infection per year now stands at more than 2.5 percent of gay men nationally. At that fatal pace, a 20-year-old homosexual man can now expect *one-third* of his similarly aged, HIV-negative peers to test HIV-positive by the time he is 30, and over *one-half* to test positive by the time he is 40.

The sad thing is that almost all of what is to come—all the death, all the pain, all the despair—could have been prevented by the simple decision to wear a condom. And yet, in spite of what at this point has to be close to 100 percent awareness in the gay community of the efficacy of condoms in halting the spread of HIV, the deadly fact remains that

unprotected sex among gay men is making a big comeback.

Why?

Why engage in a practice that—considering current estimates of the pandemic nature of HIV in the gay community—seems akin to a particularly risky and cruel type of Russian Roulette? Why kill yourself?

The answer that “60 Minutes” found is an insidiously simple one, and one that will probably sound awfully familiar to most

heterosexuals:

Condoms are antithetical to an enjoyable and meaningful sexual experience.

But whereas distaste for constant condom use is an accepted part of mainstream, heterosexual culture, what “60 Minutes” brought out into the open—for

perhaps the first time—was that gay men engage in unprotected sex for those very same reasons. The people whom “60 Minutes” interviewed sounded a number of familiar refrains when asked why they chose not to wear a condom: One man, who in 1993 had a one-night stand with a naval petty officer in Hawaii, didn’t want to break the mood of sponta-

neity and romance with a demand that the officer put on a condom. Another man explained that he and his lover of four months decided to stop wearing condoms as a symbol of their mutually-exclusive love. A third individual felt that condoms destroyed any intimacy between him and his partner. Any of those excuses sound familiar?

Lest this be dismissed as merely a gay concern, it should be noted that homosexual men have only the second-highest rate of new cases of HIV infection. The winners in this awful sweepstakes are actually young, heterosexual women—and while some of that can be explained by intravenous drug use, which is much higher among those women than among gay men—a large part of that statistic is due to the fact that the men those women were with chose not to use a condom. Again, in a sexual era dominated by fear, the question is why?

Unfortunately for the future success of AIDS-prevention, the answer to that question is the very same answer given by gay men on "60 Minutes" this past Sunday: Condoms destroy a great deal, if not all, of the joy people get from sexual intercourse. The sense of intimacy, of closeness; the mutual trust-bond built up between loving partners;

the romance and passion of the act itself; all of these are taken away by the simple act of unrolling seven inches of latex. Let's face facts: Americans—gay or straight—are caught in jaws of a sexual Catch-22, one in which the only way to safely enjoy intercourse is to deprive oneself of the value and pleasure of that intercourse.

If you don't wear a condom, you might die. But if you do wear a condom, you might as well not be having sex.

One of the "60 Minutes" interviewees—when asked if he was going to continue to have unprotected sex—told the reporter (Ed Bradley) about all the times he had gone for an HIV-test, all the while attempting to make a deal with God: Just let me be negative this one time, and I promise that I'll never do it again. Just this one time—after time, after time.

With a cure still decades away, that is a position in which a lot of Americans are going to find themselves in the years to come; because when faced with a set of unpalatable choices, it is too easy to think that you can slip by—that you can be negative just this one time. Because when it comes to wearing condoms or risking infection, many Americans still choose the lesser evil. Oh, what a beautiful morning after.

Killing Time

Daniel Krisch, CC '95, sees a view to a kill every other Thursday in *Spectrum*.



Daniel Krisch

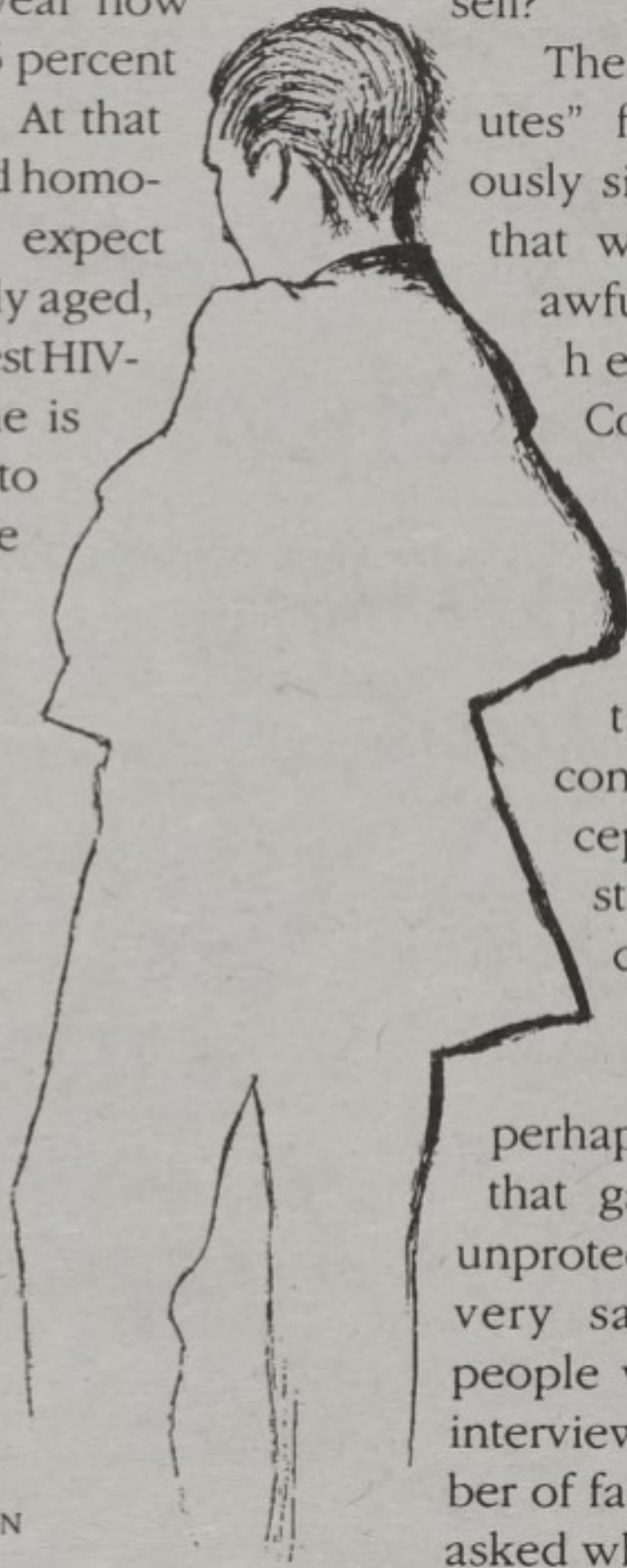
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