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Grossly Overstated



NICHOLAS
GROSSKOPF

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Last Wednesday I received a call from Fox News asking me to appear on Thursday afternoon's *The Live Desk* with Martha MacCallum. I agreed to give my thoughts about Columbia's service *Go Ask Alice* (www.goaskalice.com), a Q&A Web site sponsored by student health services that caters to the campus community in areas such as nutrition, fitness, and, in particular, sexual health. The show also featured UCLA psychiatrist-turned-author Miriam Grossman,

M.D., who would be discussing her book *Unprotected: A Campus Psychiatrist Reveals How Political Correctness in Her Profession Endangers Every Student*.

In her book, originally published under the pseudonym "Anonymous, M.D." for fear that her heterodox views would jeopardize her job and maim her character in the field, Grossman attacks college student health services (particularly Alice), asserting that political correctness, including hidden "multicultural" agendas are hurting students because they are not receiving accurate and medically sound information that could improve their sexual health. For unknown reasons, Fox News reneged on their request at the last minute and I never made it on the show to have a little banter with the good doctor.

If you're not familiar with Alice, it's not a difficult concept. The service takes questions from readers and provides answers, organized by genre. New questions are featured on the front page along with weekly themes. The 14-year-old site is a great example of sexual health social marketing, blending the elements of mass communication and health education. The site's great advantage over traditional methods of sexuality education is that it provides privacy and anonymity while remaining interpersonal. Anyone with Internet access can log on and get information that they may be uncomfortable asking about in person.

Unfortunately, the supposedly Ivy-League educated (although a graduate of NYU, which we know is not) Grossman has viciously and unfoundedly assaulted Alice, claiming that the site "gives a thumbs-

up to risky, fringe behaviors such as sadomasochism, 'swinging,' and bestiality." Furthermore, she argues that the site "normalizes" emotionally and physically damaging sexual acts such as threesomes, open relationships, and the "hook up" for our "children." Yes, folks, she went there.

Okay, so I'm going to have to stop the Prudish Parade right here. I hardly think that paraphilias (a preference for or obsession with unusual sexual practices) like S&M and swinging are "fringe." Many U.S. cities are home to plenty of fetish clubs and organizations (the Eulenspiegel Society here in New York, the Portland Leather Alliance, the Triskeli Guild in Bellingham Wash., for example) with members who live happy, well-adjusted lives. Millions of people across the country participate in "non-normative" sexual behaviors every day—this doesn't imply deviance or dysfunction. I wonder if practitioners like Grossman have dusted off their copies of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) lately? Of course there are individuals who have sexual addictions and dependencies that interfere with day-to-day functioning, and those individuals should receive the necessary clinical services. But Alice's role is education and enabling people to make informed decisions about their health, not to give therapy.

I'm sure that when it comes to education, care, and treatment in a college health setting, proponents of this pathologizing ideology would love to strap us down, tell us that if we DO have sex our genitals are going to rot from the inside and that girls should watch out for those sex-crazed boys—all you'll get from them is a broken heart and maybe a case of gonorrhea. I thought that was a part of growing up? Shit happens. Are we expected to live under a rock for the rest of our lives? At least we can educate and protect ourselves, and I don't think that suppressing developmental milestones such as a first breakup is good advice. For example, Grossman writes, "Radical politics pervades my profession, and common sense has vanished ... Before political correctness muzzled our nation in the nineties ... Self restraint built character, and character was something to strive for." Ya hear that? I guess I never got the memo that stated being a virgin was noble again.

Though sprinkled throughout with medically sound arguments, *Unprotected* is riddled with myths, stereotypes and judgments about sexuality, sexual health, and risky behaviors. In one chapter, Grossman describes one patient, an openly gay male who is mute on the subject of HIV. Talk of safer sex makes him nervous. To her credit, the doctor spends several pages discussing her concern for the patient and his partners with regard to preventing future infection. Regrettably, she takes another nosedive when she describes her horribly assumptive and unethical reaction after reading an ad for the Roxy (a famous gay dance club in NYC) in the campus gay publication: "I want to scream. But there's an epidemic raging—haven't you heard? There are 60,000 men in New York City with HIV or AIDS! Thank you for letting my patient know where they hang out." Hey, doc—I've been to the Roxy, and I'm not positive.

Someone should let these Puritanical critics of sexual expression in on this secret: research has shown that comprehensive sexuality education (which includes but

comprehensive sexuality education (which includes but is not limited to abstinence) is more effective than abstinence-only education. People are depressed, anxious and "heartbroken" all over this country, but that's nothing new (hello, recurring Zoloft and Paxil commercials). The mere fact that people engage in sexual behaviors makes them normal. We're okay. It's high time that Grossman and like-minded clinicians let us "children" grow up, tone down, and if necessary, be prepared to write us a prescription for a nasty little bout of syphilis.

Nicholas Grosskopf is a doctoral student in health education at Teachers College.

Sexual Edification runs alternate Mondays.

Specopinion@columbia.edu



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