

COMMENTARY by Terje Anderson

When AIDS is not news

Readers of the Burlington Free Press have recently faced two stories which served no newsworthy purpose other than to alarm the public.

In December, the paper reported that health authorities were investigating the case of a gay man who died on Christmas day, and that AIDS was one of the possibilities being considered. This was reported despite the fact that there was no evidence to suggest that the man had died of AIDS-related causes. (A month later, autopsy reports confirmed that he had died from heart failure and that he did not, in fact, have AIDS.)

Then, in early February, the front page of the local section carried the news that a person with AIDS had been admitted to a local hospital. The

story included significant discussion of the precautions hospital staff members would take to avoid contracting the virus from the patient.

With both of these stories, the Free Press overstepped the bounds of appropriate coverage of AIDS issues. It is particularly upsetting because the Vermont media, including the Free Press, has previously been far less inflammatory than much of the press across the country in its AIDS coverage.

While these stories do not approach the blantly homophobic and sensationalist journalism of papers like the New York Post, they do represent a disturbing trend.

In the case of the first story, it was highly misleading to suggest that AIDS was the cause of death when absolutely no evidence pointed in that direction. While health authorities legitimately consider all possibilities in an unexplained death, it would hardly have been considered newsworthy if a heart attack or stroke was being investigated.

Gay men continue to develop many illnesses other than AIDS, and to report that AIDS was suspected merely because a person was gay is to make an unwarranted connection.

It is particularly disconcerting because such a suggestion can only serve to amplify the AIDS-related discrimination which gay men increasingly face. There have been cases of gay men with the flu fired because an employer believes the illness is AIDS. Everytime a gay man coughs, develops a rash, or loses weight, rumors spread about his health. Stories such as the one in the Free Press only encourage such misinformed speculation.

In the case of the second story, it is unclear why the Free Press felt it was newsworthy that someone had been admitted to the hospital. Hundreds of

people are admitted to the hospital everyday, for a variety of reasons, but that is never considered front page news unless the patient is famous. Why was this different?

More disturbing was the article's discussion of the precautions hospital staff would be taking to avoid exposure. The procedures to be followed are hardly extraordinary, the same as for hepatitis and other infections.

Yet, despite quoting hospital authorities to the contrary, the article could only reinforce the misimpression that AIDS is easily transmitted. By simply raising the issue, the article conjures up visions of rubber gloves, isolation wards and surgical masks in the mind of the average Free Press reader. In fact, the only real matter of concern is being accidentally pricked with a needle used for drawing blood.

The Free Press seems to be trying, a bit too hard, to find something to report about AIDS in Vermont. In a state with only six cases to date, that sometimes means grasping at straws, reporting on events which are not really news.

To the paper's credit, they did run a sizeable article when the autopsy report on the December death came out. That story, which quoted medical authorities and gay activists criticizing the coverage, seemed to be an attempt to undo the damage done by the earlier article, an acknowledgement of error.

There is plenty of legitimate news to be reported about AIDS if the Free Press really wants to cover it. The public is starved for accurate information about transmission, medical advances, risk reduction, the antibody test and AIDS related legal and social issues. Let's hope they devote their energies in the future to reporting that real news, rather than manufacturing stories which invade individual privacy and do nothing to educate the public.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Friends,

Please sign me up to receive "Out in the Mountains" monthly. It was informative and wonderful to hear all the good work that is being done in Vermont to celebrate the goodness and diversity of the lesbian and gay community. I am pleased to be a proud supporter in Middlebury. I am eager for the day when all publications will refuse to publish material which is racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, ageist or homophobic and when all people will happily welcome diversity in all our Vermont communities.

Sincerely
Jean Shappee

Purpose

The purpose of 'Out in the Mountains' is to serve as a voice for lesbians, gay men, and our supporters in Vermont. We wish the newspaper to be a source of information, support and affirmation for lesbians and gay men. We also see it as a vehicle for celebration of the goodness and diversity of the lesbian and gay community.

Editorial Policy

We will consider for publication any material which broadens our understanding of our lifestyles and of each other. Views and opinions appearing in the paper do not necessarily represent those of the staff.

This paper cannot, and will not endorse any candidate for public office. We will serve as a vehicle for informing our readers about the views of candidates and actions of public officials on issues of particular concern to lesbians and gay men.

We will not publish any material which is overtly racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, ageist or homophobic.

All materials submitted must be signed and include an address and/or phone number so we can contact the author should we need to consider editorial revisions. However, within the pages of the newspaper, articles can appear anonymously, upon request, and strict confidentiality will be observed. No revisions or rejections of materials will occur without dialogue with the author.

We welcome and encourage all readers to submit materials for publication and to share your comments, criticisms, and positive feelings with us. This paper is here for you.

The deadline for submitting material for each issue is the 15th of the month prior to publication.

Materials should be sent to 'Out in the Mountains,' Box 438, Hinesburg, VT 05461.

Out in the Mountains Subscriptions

Subscriptions to 'Out in the Mountains' are available for \$10 per year (12 issues), \$5 for low-income and unemployed people. By subscribing, not only will you guarantee prompt delivery of the newspaper to your mailbox (in a discreet plain envelope, of course), but you will help to underwrite the sizable costs of assembling, printing and distributing the newspaper.

In addition to subscriptions, we welcome contributions to support our continued existence.

Checks should be made payable to 'Out in the Mountains' or OITM and sent, along with this form,

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