

Steppin' Out

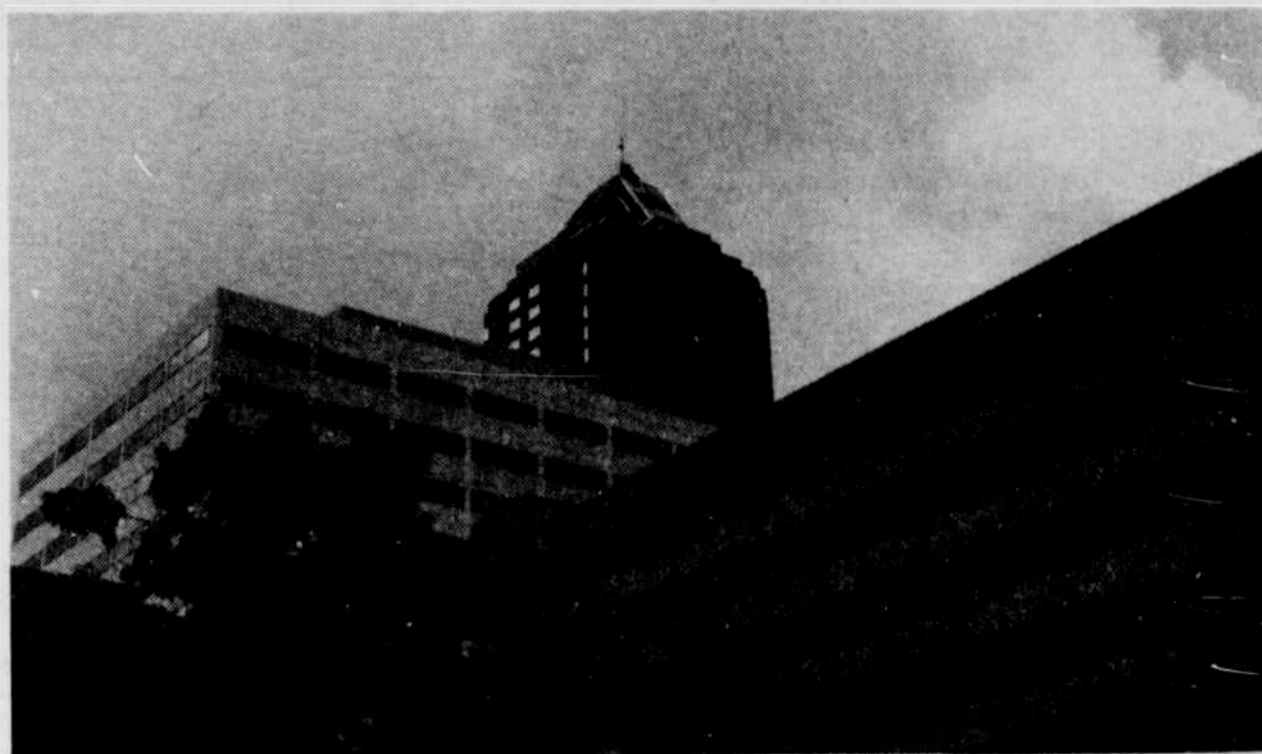


photo by Jay Brown

EDITORIAL

Does safe sex mean no sex?

The sensitive nature of the health education campaigns, the epidemic, and sexuality itself raises many questions.

BY JAMES SKOLAUT

Condoms For Oral Sex?" the leading question of a Cascade AIDS Project ad, is bound to raise more questions of prevention and

decision should be "unanimous" in '87. While most of us respect reliable information demystifying the AIDS virus for our own personal safety, the social and political integrity of such campaigns could be better respected if sexuality is to survive. This calls for the adaptability of not just gay and bisexual men, as the ad suggests, but of people of every persuasion, the larger medical community, especially.

Leading off with the condoms for oral sex question is a little like the nervous but forthright mother asking the teenage daughter if she's taken the pill before going out on a date. It presents oral sex in the context of a lifestyle option in which anyone considering it had better first consider the condom. Good advice stretching over anal and vaginal sex as well, and especially timely for those pursuing sex as a matter of lifestyle. Here, however, one might detect a strangely interesting irony: That no one pursuing sex as a lifestyle stands to risk anything in snapping rubbers on and off in an orgy of encounters that

may continue indefinitely. Those who would not have condoms advertised on television use this as their leading argument, that in spite of necessity, condoms represent a passport to promiscuity. These same people would have us abandon sexuality altogether, in the name of a morally perfect universe, rather than address the crisis of sexuality in today's real world.

The Unsafe Sex campaign encourages, on one hand, the false notion that somehow we can sheath ourselves absolutely, even unanimously from the personal risks and contradictions of sexuality for an indefinite period of time. It raises unfair and unrealistic expectations on the other that, like a war raging, the epidemic will just be "over" on the day when we can crawl out of our shelters and risk living again. Indications are strong that we'll be at war with the virus for a long time. Perhaps longer than the number of years remaining among the very youngest for them to risk living a full and sexually responsible life. If unsafe sex is indeed obsolete, or should be unanimously, what about those in exclusive sexual relationships that are based on trust and an acceptance of all the risks in keeping a commitment alive?

If oral, vaginal and anal sex without condom is unsafe in all circumstances, then the attitude toward assessing risks becomes prohibitive. Yet someone must risk questioning the social integrity of health campaigns which generate the feeling that we are correct politically in the sense that we are restrictive sexually. Such feeling creates a prohibitive climate in which it's easier to hide, to "just say no" than to assume that some risks might have to be weighed against the prospect of sexuality becoming socially, even politically repressive.

Clearly, the ability to weigh personal decisions carefully against the risks of contracting AIDS will require the steady flow of factual information about the virus itself. This puts the AIDS foundations across the country "at risk" with the responsible intentions and interpreting abilities of the respective communities. The success in the war against AIDS will flow not from the politics of prohibition, but from the same sense of social commitment that marked our community's rapid ability to mobilize from the start. In this, credit must be accepted for taking the proper risks.

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