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Speak Out

Teaser was inaccurate

TO THE EDITOR:

I was surprised to read the teaser stating "CAP calls for regulation of sex clubs" on your recent cover and again in the headline of the accompanying article on Page 12 ["The Party's Over," Jan. 9]. The fact is, Cascade AIDS Project has not officially called for regulation of sex clubs, making both your teaser and headline inaccurate.

CAP has been dismayed and frustrated by increases in syphilis, barebacking and injection drug use among some gay/bisexual men. As a result, we approached the Multnomah County Health Department and encouraged it to partner with us by stepping up its response to these alarming trends. It explained that the majority of new syphilis cases were coming out of sex clubs, and our own prevention work confirmed the frightening incidence of needle use and barebacking behavior in some of these establishments.

In light of these high-risk behaviors, we strongly encouraged the health department to engage sexually oriented businesses directly and insist on zero-tolerance policies regarding barebacking and needle use. Over several months, we discussed, debated and explored a variety of options for decreasing such high-risk behavior in sex clubs—only one of which was regulation. At the end of the day, the health department concluded—and CAP agreed—that clear, consistent and voluntary standards adopted by sex clubs were the preferred way to go at this time.

I suppose you or some of your readers might argue that even discussing the possibility of regulation among other options is identical to calling for it. It isn't. Your teaser and headline overreached and, unfortunately, have left many with an inaccurate understanding of our view.

THOMAS BRUNER
Cascade AIDS Project Executive Director

Bathhouse bull

TO THE EDITOR:

Just Out asks whether the Multnomah County Health Department should regulate sex clubs, as Cascade AIDS Project has called on it to do, supposedly in response to recent reported increases in STDs. The answer is no.

If the fine folks at CAP are scratching their heads over why their safer-sex campaigns aren't producing desired results, perhaps it is because they are more interested in fund raising than finding and supporting effective programs.

Last February, Just Out reported CAP's announcement of intent to "redouble" its presence at the baths as part of its educational efforts, claiming that one 15-minute interface with a gay man had more impact than giving away 30 safer-sex kits ["Putting Out in Public," Feb. 21]. Whatever became of that effort was not reported, but a letter to Willamette Week from Tom Kuffner, a former CAP volunteer, indicated that, although the program was popular and "financially self-sufficient," it was discontinued by CAP's top dog, Thomas Bruner, for "financial reasons" [Dec. 31].

That CAP is now calling on the health department to "regulate" sex clubs in Portland isn't surprising. CAP is under the gun to justify its funding, more than half of which comes from the government. Regulating sex clubs is easy, measurable and high-profile. It will play well on the grant money gravy train, which no doubt makes it attractive to CAP, despite CAP's not finding the sex clubs to be worthy for educational support.

Philip Knowlton, a program coordinator for CAP, is reported in Just Out as believing Internet chat rooms pose more of a threat than sex clubs. CAP repeatedly claims it isn't calling for the "sex

police." This rings false; regulations require enforcement, which means policing. Of course, the health department has no authority to regulate or police sex clubs, as Dr. Gary Oxman told Just Out in "The Party's Over." At least not yet.

CAP's push for regulation may also explain Thomas Bruner's comments in WW's "The Clap Is Back" [Dec. 10]. There he asserts that the demand for sex clubs is driven by "social problems that plague a disproportionate number of gay men" and "the alcoholism, anxiety disorder, depression and self-esteem issues endemic to gay men." In two short sentences Bruner indicts, demeans and disenfranchises a whole class of men, playing on the general public's discomfort with the practical facts of sexuality in the gay male world. It's bull, of course, but Bruner's willingness to sell out gay men is telling. Regulating sex clubs in Portland serves CAP, not gay men.

CAP's calling for the regulation of the sex clubs is self-serving, cynical and irresponsible with far-reaching consequences at the expense of gay men and everyone else. No regulation of sex clubs!

STUART ZIMMERMAN
Portland

The sky isn't falling

TO THE EDITOR:

At last, Cascade AIDS Project admits its prevention program isn't working and has run out of fresh ideas—except one that reeks of stupidity. Ask the Multnomah County Health Department to regulate commercial sex venues to stem the rise in STDs among men who bareback.

Sorry, CAP, that's not the freshest idea. San Francisco closed its steam baths years ago, and their infection stats are rising, too. So padlocking commercial meat markets isn't the answer, but bathhouses make convenient targets. Especially when we hear CAP's Philip Knowlton wring his hands and whine, "I can't tell you how frustrating it is for me to watch 30 to 40 guys barebacking at Club Portland and not be able to do anything about it." Gee, Phil, maybe handing them a condom or a brochure would have cooled their ardor for unprotected sex. Merely watching dangerous liaisons is hardly proactive intervention.

So maybe CAP should turn its prevention cash over to the health department—but to do what? Issue tickets for lack of latex? Hose down sexual risk-takers? Hire more staff to cruise sex venues to collar medical morons? The owners of Portland's two largest sex clubs for gays are sniffing the wind and are falling all over themselves to show they intend to take stiffer measures against naked stiffies so CAP's latest bright idea doesn't close them down. Maybe CAP's prevention cash should go to sex clubs and gay bars to help them enforce their versions of a no-tolerance policy toward barebacking.

I'm opposed to barebacking. It's obviously medically risky. But I think CAP is trying to look like the "good gays" who deserve a continuing cash flow to combat the "bad gays" who still get HIV despite public knowledge about prevention.

Whether HIV-positive or not, gay men are getting a mixed message from CAP. Especially when director Thomas Bruner blames drugs, the Internet, sex clubs and the "alcoholism, anxiety disorder, depression and self-esteem issues endemic to gay men."

One message is: We want you to be sexually responsible. The other message is: Gay men probably can't be. They're too emotionally and psychologically damaged from the get-go. Is Bruner & Co. channeling Jerry Falwell or the Vatican here? Wow. Lighten up!

But I think the most important statement of "The Party's Over" was unfortunately buried in the text. Health officials have not proven a link between barebacking and increasing syphilis

and gonorrhea rates during the past two years. Let's slow down the rush to judgment here, even though it makes for exciting press.

Maybe CAP should rein in its sky-is-falling hysteria, quit gay-bashing the newly infected, focus also on straight sex clubs and those guys who don't latex up, and de-glamorize its printed material sporting buff guys with fab abs and teeth like Chiclets who imply that drugs can make HIV manageable. We're pitching a lot of money your way, CAP. Come up with a better idea than forfeiting your mission to the health department.

GORDON JOHNSTON
Portland

Reality check

TO THE EDITOR:

Cascade AIDS Project rep Philip Knowlton needs a reality check. Just how does he plan to regulate barebacking? Stick a flashlight down there?

Mr. Knowlton claimed he had personally seen 30 to 40 men barebacking one night. Did he say anything? I doubt it. I've seen a plethora of used condoms scattered everywhere about Club Portland. There was a time when CAP made regular monthly visits to Club Portland for AIDS education and testing; they'd strip down to towels and join the patrons, offering them condoms and lube. Where are you now, Mr. Knowlton? I've seen CAP volunteers at Club Portland one time in the past six months, and they never left the room the club has set aside for them.

And please don't use the excuse that your funds have been cut to make the rounds at the various bathhouses and sex clubs in town—that's what volunteers are for. There are fliers, posters and condoms galore as well as the newly instituted public address announcement about safe sex at Club Portland; the patrons know full well what they're doing, so you know the rise in STDs is just out of laziness. The information is out there; what more can be done? Using a condom is personal choice. Speaking for myself, you don't use a condom, you don't play with me. But not everyone has that conviction.

So instead of hanging out at the bars, go to Club Portland and Steam and do your job, Mr. Knowlton! Don't ask the county or the establishments to do your job for you!

And by the way, why wasn't Club XES mentioned in the article?

JON SAUER
Portland

Take responsibility

TO THE EDITOR:

Regarding the recent article "The Party's Over," kudos to the author and Just Out for focusing on the syphilis outbreaks in Portland. The data tell the story clearly. Dr. Gary Oxman, Multnomah County's public health director, is a wise man for stepping back from government-imposed regulation and calling for community input to attack the problem.

As an owner of the newest men's sex club in Portland, I have been aware, alarmed and vocal about the increase in syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases. We have had a no-barebacking policy, as well as a no-drugs-or-alcohol policy, since the day Steam Portland opened. We have been diligent in rooting out any abuse and have revoked memberships of individuals who will not abide by the policy.

Additionally, we have carefully edited all video material shown in the club to ensure that barebacking is not presented in any form. We announce our no-barebacking rule as a condition of membership, and we have clear messages that we present to our members: "Smart Guys