

NATIONAL news

NYC HIV SUPER STRAIN: "NEVER MIND"

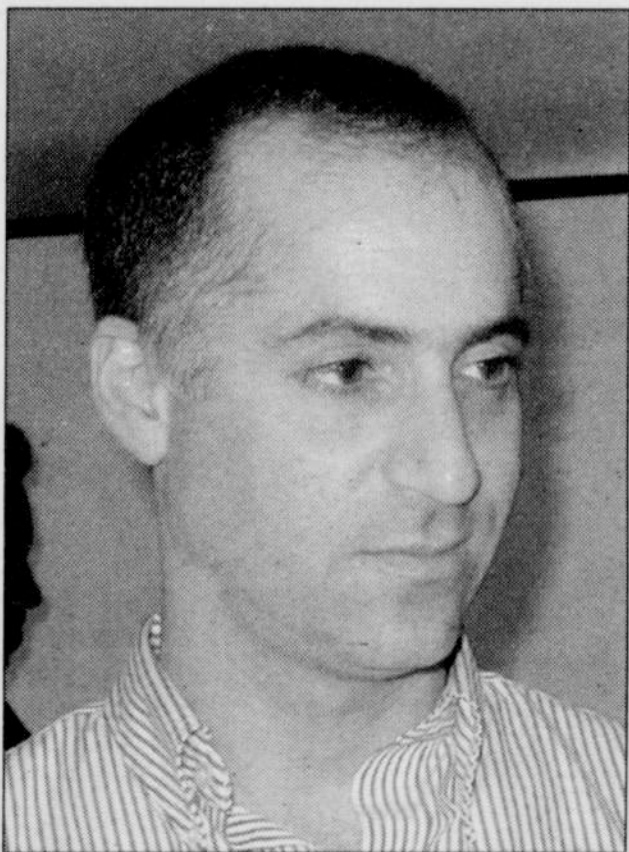
Emily Litella was a character developed on *Saturday Night Live* by the late comedian Gilda Radner who always seemed to misinterpret one key element of a serious issue. When her confusion was finally explained and resolved, Litella would say: "Oh, that's different. Never mind."

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene issued the bureaucratic equivalent of that punch line in an update on a "super strain" of HIV that they breathlessly announced at a news conference Feb. 11. The update came late March 29.

Health commissioner Thomas R. Frieden had said in February that the virus of the man in question was resistant to 19 of the 21 drugs approved to treat HIV, based upon laboratory tests. He feared the patient would be difficult if not impossible to treat.

The experience with the patient on therapy hasn't quite matched up with what was predicted in the lab—a discordance that is common. The update admitted: "The patient is responding to treatment thus far. This indicates that the strain, while difficult to treat, appears to be treatable at this point."

But the department could not drop its panic mode entirely. It continued, "However, the patient remains critically ill and must continue to be monitored closely." It did not elaborate on how the patient's medical care might differ, or



New York City health commissioner Thomas R. Frieden downplayed the wider significance of the HIV "super strain" found in one man last winter.

not differ, from that of other patients with HIV.

The patient has said he had more than a hundred sexual partners during the four- to 20-month window within which he was believed to have become infected with HIV. Most of those were anonymous encounters.

The department officially is tight-lipped about its success in identifying and contacting those partners, but an unnamed source told *The New York Times* it has reached about a dozen men.

The updated stated, "As of today, no other cases of multi-drug-class resistant, rapidly progressive HIV have been identified." A broader survey of HIV tests conducted by commercial laboratories identified several similar strains of virus, though none that is identical to the one highlighted at the February news conference.

Lost within the hype about "super strains" is the fact that the number of new cases of HIV and AIDS diagnoses continues to decline in New York City, according to the most recently available data from the city health department. That mirrors a similar recent report from San Francisco.

—Bob Roehr

WEB SITE DRAWS FIRE

A new Web site operated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.4parents.gov, has drawn fire from gay advocates and others for pushing a right-wing agenda and ignoring issues that queer youth often face.

The Web site "is a guide to help you and your teen discuss important, yet difficult, issues about healthy choices, sex and relationships," according to its home page. It began March 25. It was created with the assistance of the National Physicians Center for Family Resources. The Alabama-based group was paid for its services and has received contracts to run abstinence-only programs. It is anti-choice, with strong ties to Focus on the Family and other social conservative groups.

The site is little more than an online brochure or pamphlet and lacks a search func-



Judy Davids of the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project speaks out against the government's abstinence-only site www.4parents.gov.

tion for easy use. This being a G-rated government Web site, it sticks to clinical terminology, not the more common slang that teens typically use to describe sexual acts.

In a March 29 letter to Health Secretary Michael O. Leavitt, the Human Rights Campaign expressed concern that "the material on your Web site perpetuates some dangerous misperceptions that could prove harmful to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth and their families."

It pointed out that the section on sexual orientation can only be accessed through a section on abstinence. "Given that abstinence is commonly understood to mean abstinence until marriage and given that LGBT individuals (unless they live in Massachusetts) are denied the ability to legally marry, this is a counter-intuitive place for this discussion."

Julie Davids, executive director of Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project, criticized the Web site's content "for saying that condoms don't work, while overlooking the flaws of abstinence-promotion programs." It also "encourages young people to shun people living with HIV."

CHAMP is urging people to contact Leavitt to tell him to "take down the site until you have honest information to support all kinds of healthy families, including families living with HIV."

The Sexual Information and Education Council of the United States has organized 144 national, state and local organizations in a sign-on letter to Leavitt. The letter criticized the site for dictating "values and ground rules to parents," relying upon "fear and shame" and distorting the needs of U.S. teens.

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