

Fanning HIV fear fosters discrimination

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The recent arrest of a man with HIV for allegedly infecting at least one woman has revealed the extent to which this [virus](#) [1]A small infective organism which is incapable of reproducing outside a host cell. still engenders exceptional fear in the community. It has also unmasked the eagerness of some media to fan this fear.

More than 25 years ago Australians were warned by their government about the risks of unprotected sex and the importance of using condoms: a cool-headed response in the context of much media hysteria.

Building on that initial approach, successive Australian governments, in partnership with clinicians and community groups, have worked to implement HIV education messages, counselling and support that have protected the vast majority of sexually active Australians from infection. As a result, Australia is recognised internationally for its public health response to HIV.

An aspect of this public health response includes measures to monitor and manage individuals who put others at risk of infection. Options available to public health authorities are broad and range from education and counselling in the first instance to involuntary detainment or psychological treatment for more serious cases. Notwithstanding the measures available, all Australians have a responsibility to minimise their risk of HIV by practising safe sex.

Recent reporting in Australian media has shown the ignorance of many commentators of the comprehensive detail of these systems and procedures, which in the majority of cases are effective at reducing risks to the community. While tabloid media often focus on the salacious aspects of individual behaviour and the mode of transmission, there is also a tendency to represent cases of HIV transmission as a failure of public health systems or policy.

Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* (May 26) reported that an "HIV-positive circus acrobat who appeared on Australia's Got Talent has triggered a national health scare after allegations he had unprotected sex with at least 11 women, including some from NSW". Beside the text on the website is a clip of the shirtless man on Australia's Got Talent under the headline "HIV carrier flirts with Dannii".

The *Sunday Courier Mail* in Brisbane (May 30) went to press with "What a circus: HIV acrobat ran rings around health authorities". The coverage included a suggestion that an "HIV register" be used to track people with HIV. These stories echo some of the reporting that occurred in Queensland in 1984 when four babies became infected with HIV through blood transfusions that subsequently led to the appalling scapegoating of people with HIV and gay men in particular.

The population of people with HIV in Australia is diverse and numbers about 19,000 people. It includes: men, women and children; those infected through sexual contact (both gay and heterosexual); those infected in a health care setting (as patients or workers); injecting drug users; and Australians who have acquired the virus overseas, in so-called high-prevalence countries.

All of these people caught HIV from someone else and none of them deserved it. Sometimes the complexity of our human desires leads to consequences we later regret. Sometimes, simply, accidents happen. HIV is not a morality tale; it is a blood-borne virus. It is serious but also preventable when we all take responsibility for protecting ourselves.

People living with HIV in Australia have been major architects of the programs and policies of HIV prevention and education. Public health authorities and the community are in a partnership that should be valued because of its impressive results over more than a quarter of a century, not undermined when one person's alleged aberrant behaviour becomes tabloid fodder.

This article appeared in the [online editions of the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age](#) [2] on Thursday, 3 June 2010.

- [Criminalisation of HIV transmission](#)
- [the media](#)

Links:

[1] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/125>

[2]
<http://www.nationaltimes.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/fanning-hiv-fear-fosters-discrimination-20100602-wyu8.html>