

living

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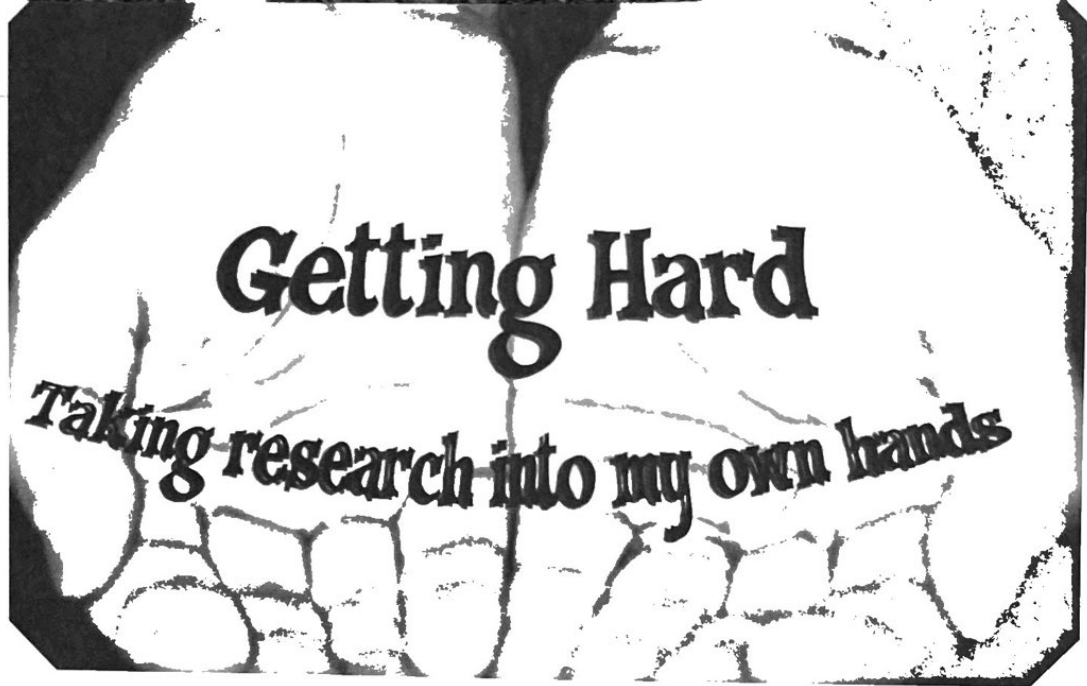
Taking Time

Growing older
with HIV

> housing and health

> the "d" drugs

> integrative medicine



by *Francisco Ibáñez-Carrasco*

Recently, a friend assured me that we should take our cues for a positive prevention strategy in queer communities from gay men over 30 living with HIV.

I thought that the problems with prevention were promiscuity and our new millennium obsession with body cavities, fluids, insertions, ingestions, and injections. My friend says the challenges are the endemic indifference and self-righteousness gay men feel about each other. The intense traffic of “positive” gay stereotypes creates an illusion of inclusion. Still trapped in archaic and exploitative heterosexual contracts of romantic love, we forget the value of promiscuity and other elements of queer culture. We need to revisit poz men’s reasons to engage in consensual activities involving potent drugs, sometimes S&M, and the reshaping of bodies at once pneumatic, infused with chemicals, and riddled with lipodystrophy—reasons that are not always apparent but that evidence a search for a new identity as barebackers who are practicing a form of community ethics and even harm reduction.

That night, surrounded by a tribe of HIV-positive leather gargoyles, I had nightmares of Ashley MacIsaac in a tight rubber outfit commanding, “Drink it!” and Sue Johanson wielding a didactic finger, advising me to “put it in a cup and sip it slow, dear.” I woke up frazzled. My friend’s convoluted argument was the wailing of addicted, aging positive white gay men looking for excuses to glorify irresponsible acts that alienate the innocent, young, and healthy.

Livid, I called the slut back. So what’s wrong with a bit of a reality check? he said. Don’t we alienate poz guys from the diagnosis day? Barebackers do practice harm reduction in the face of the most rabid self-righteousness of the young and healthy. Educators are missing the beat. Merchants are *not*—see all the Web sites targeted at them. Young queers are only picking up on the external cues and not on the values of our sexual culture. Bareback is not shorthand for irresponsible fucking deluded by the straight romance of Harlequin paperbacks—I was aghast, but kept on listening—love *does* happen between queer

men. It is distinct and equal but separate.

We have overprotected our young and failed to tell them that sex is good, drugs are great, and that both kill, he concluded. Blinded by a commercial brand of liberation, we ignore the aging AIDS survivors—those barebackers—because the sexuality of the disabled, ugly, and retarded is uncomfortable.

We hang up. I took research into my own hands and let my fingers do the work. Hooked into the Internet, I parachuted myself into the bustling global sexual market. Armed with airbrushed photos of myself in implausible positions and costumes to convey either fierce maturity or candid youth, I made my entrance.

As my friend predicted, new meat is hot, so I got hit upon a lot. In the seeming safety of my house, where I was supposedly free to manage my identity, silence, smoke, and mirrors confounded these exchanges.

However, this apparent openness that will save us from infection and loving monogamous relationships is deceiving. People are still telling lies to themselves and to others—the lies of straight marriage and monogamous sex, for example.

The polite, conventional, optimistic, and complacent have triumphed. The etherland is a new closet where virtuality is not virtuosity. Queer sex does not infect more than straight sex, just differently. Our perverse sexual ways really do protect the disabled (HIV or otherwise), honour age, and celebrate sexual knowledge instead of the rights of the clean and healthy, the arrogance of the beautiful and young, and the opulence of “normal” queers—their condos, SUVs, adopted babies, and blessings of their straight contemporaries. ⊕

Francisco Ibáñez-Carrasco's collection of short stories (many of them about living with HIV) will be published in August 2004 by Suspect Thoughts Press, San Francisco.

