

# **The Advocate's Forum**

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## **Primordial Bonds, Breaks, Social Marketing and a Fresh Look at AIDS Prevention Policy**

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"Safe sex is hot sex," bus stop posters read throughout the city. The year was 1993 and a fortuitous survey illustrating a big problem was taken of some seventy-five San Francisco AIDS workers. We were asked which of us had some form of unsafe sex with a new partner within the last six months. Half the people in the room raised their hands. The supposition that the city had created a nationally renowned model of AIDS prevention which had halted new rates of infection within the gay population had served a purpose: providing hope; unfortunately very little actual data confirmed that sexual behaviors had really changed.

Conventional wisdom was not supported by evidence. The truth was: people who knew better were still being unsafe. Root causes and solutions lay far deeper than anyone had imagined. Social marketing campaigns, while well intentioned, had been driven by urgency, not data. A period of reassessment followed and continues to this day. This essay examines the national debate around and search for effective methods to prevent a new generation from getting sick.

### ***Waves of Recrimination***

On December 11, 1993, the *New York Times* reported: "Second Wave of AIDS Feared by Officials in San Francisco." The secret was out. Although prevention efforts appeared to have dramatically reduced new rates of infection; in fact, most gay men in America were tested with the advent of the screening in 1985. Positive test numbers went down in the following years primarily because most everyone had already tested. Eric Rofes (1996:173-8) points out, "Evidence was never presented which

