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SANTA BARBARA • SANTA CRUZ

PREVENTION SCIENCES GROUP

School of Medicine, UCSF
Campus Mail: Box 0886Mailing Address:
74 New Montgomery, Suite 600
San Francisco, CA 94105Telephone: (415) 597-9100
Fax: (415) 597-9213

TO: The Commissioners
FROM: Jeff Stryker
DATE: August 3, 1992

I usually have the pleasure of staying out of Commission politics. I would happily continue to do so, but I feel compelled to speak to aspects of some recent memos that bear on my professional reputation, especially now that I can speak my piece while no longer on the payroll.

The People of Color Report

Although Harlon's recent screed is clearly aimed at Roy (and Roy can take care of himself), I feel compelled to respond personally because I am mentioned by name a couple of times¹. I've endured a couple of years of Harlon's joking condescension, believing that it is the lot of staff people everywhere and that I was paid handsomely to do so. What I do not have to take sitting down is this kind of attack, with its not-so-thinly veiled charge of racism, even if I'm just being caught in the crossfire. *attached*

During my couple of month's tenure as interim director of the Commission I took what I thought were the obvious steps to help jump start the people of color report. Before arriving in Washington I sent a note to four pairs of Commission staff members, asking them to write an "AIDS 101" memo on each of the four communities the Commissioners had directed the staff to focus upon.

The original idea was to work over these staff memos and meld them with Harlon, Eunice and Karen's soaring exegesis on race in America--a look at the complex mix of factors related to race, ethnicity, class, poverty, sex and disease, etc. This broader look at racism and HIV is the aspect of the report that will make it much more than something that "could as easily have come from

¹. "you and/or Jeff seem to have decided that the process should be radically altered." "I have spoken to Jeff about this, but to no apparent avail." (Harlon--I thought you'd appreciate at least one footnote).

the Institute of Medicine."² With my memo, I also sent a bibliography and stacks of articles from which to glean the needed background information.

My memo sunk like a stone. Not a single staff person wrote anything in response, and only a few took the time to say that they weren't going to do what I asked. Some folks on the staff did complain to Harlon about their assignments. This is where I first had a chance to deal with Harlan on this report. Actually, "deal with Harlon" is not quite phrasing it correctly, because for a month he refused to acknowledge or return my calls or arrange a time when we could talk. I guess I got a few messages back and forth through Karen, because we finally secured Harlon's grudging, last-minute cooperation to come to a meeting at the office with June and the staff about the report. The meeting was wonderful--what I imagine Yale Law School seminars must be like. It confirmed my belief that it was worth the struggle to try to engage Harlon.

This is by way of explanation as to why it was thought we had to rely in part on outside consultants, as we had for ALWA and other reports that involved issues beyond the ken of the staff as constituted (in the past, I guess it was Maureen's friends upon whom we relied, at about ten times the expense).

I don't see what Harlon seeks to gain in his final weeks with the Commission, by faxing his memo to all the Commissioners. As far as the charges of "unprofessional" and "demeaning conduct" and being "marginalized and treated with less respect than I think we are all due," I guess this is for Harlon and Roy to duke it out, now with the whole Commission watching. Obviously the Commissioners are due all sorts of respect just for being Commissioners. The respect due them doesn't extend to acquiescing to the kinds of charges Harlon is leveling or not setting the facts straight. The fact is that Harlon was consulted about the report whenever he would deign to pick up the phone and there have never been any roadblocks to Harlon, Eunice and other Commissioners having whatever level of input into the report they wished.

The final point of the memo seems to be that Roy overstepped his bounds in hiring a copy editor. Can this really be the point? If so, so what? Harlon, Eunice and Karen will obviously not be asked to cede any final say to this person, so what's the big deal? Obviously, Harlon's memo is intended more as a shot across

². Another snipe I don't understand. Of course, the IOM tends to be more staid that the Commission would want to be, but the Commission could do far worse, for example, than the NRC report, A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society.

the bow, than a discussion of how this particular report can be completed.

I fervently hope that the upshot of the recent memo wars (in which I would have preferred to remain a noncombatant) is not to sink this report. I hope to see a blockbuster report on communities of color that speaks to the people who have courageously shared their stories with us over the years and resonates with the communities and the Commissioners. I have volunteered with Karen to contribute in any way I can in the next few months on my own time.

The Health Care Workers' Report

Another issue about which the Commissioners have all recently received a fax relates to the recent release of the health care workers report. On this one I'll open with a *mea culpa* for not seeing to it that the Commissioners had a final sign-off version prior to galleys being sent to the printer. To be fair to the Washington staff who worked hard on the production aspects of this one (Tracy Brandt and Vicky Fujii), it is amazing, given all that transpired last month, that a report got out the door at all before the August doldrums set in.

Let's get real here, though. The level of Commissioner interest in text reached a new low with this report, however controversial the topic. Aside from June and David, I received comments only from Don and Harlon, with very minor exceptions. This is not to excuse the Commissioners' not receiving timely opportunity to comment on a final version of the report (even where there have been only minor changes since the penultimate draft, as was the case here). Nevertheless, the level of disgruntlement about this one is embarrassingly disingenuous.

Some General Thoughts on the Fourth Year

The Commission process of late can be likened to a car accident that one slows down to see as one drives by. Taking a look at the wreckage, one is alternately fascinated and repelled (and perhaps depressed at one's own inability to turn away). This is what the Commission has become--rubberneckers fascinated by the internecine drama of office politics in a time of unfortunate retrenchment. The disheartening result is gridlock--although the AIDS crisis doesn't await any traffic jam.

For most of the time since the beginning of the year, or perhaps since the burst of energy expended to produce ALWA, the Commission has degenerated into a kind of floating dinner party. The *modus operandi* is to go from city to city, invite some interesting folks to hear from, ask a few questions, have a reception and move on. However informative these meetings may be, they don't translate into a prescription for change for the

President, Congress, and the American people without subsequent hard work that the Commission seems disinclined to do.

The constant focus on process at the expense of substance has made it nearly impossible to do good work. I suspect I spend 90% of my conversational time with other Commission staff on issues of office intrigue. The Commissioners take umbrage at any hint that their interest in the daily workings of the office and the Commission budget is "micromanagement." Of course, the Commissioners (and June and David especially) are ultimately responsible for ensuring the responsible use of Commission funds. They should want to know what is going on in considerable detail. Nevertheless, the process will never work until there is some level of trust. Perhaps this is no longer possible, but I can tell you from experience that the office doesn't work when everyone has to be involved in, not merely apprised of, every decision.

As an advisory body, the Commission's influence comes largely from the strength of the documents it produces--how well it makes a case, documents it, and backs it with all the moral suasion it can muster. I have frequently been at odds with David and others about the style of Commission workproducts, but I thought there was little disagreement that this is the primary work of the Commission.

The Commissioners somehow need to refocus their attention on where the AIDS crisis is going. For example, I was dumbfounded as I watched the HIV/tuberculosis crisis unfold on the front page of the New York Times and Newsweek earlier this year. I couldn't understand why the Commissioners didn't rise up as a group and insist, if not that the Commission issue a report, that it be convened to be briefed extensively on what is probably the most troubling and complex aspect of the epidemic at the moment. I have other such concerns, but this issue symbolizes all of them. I have the sense that the fax and phone lines have been burning for weeks and months and that seldom have AIDS policy issues even arisen.

I won't even ask, "Can we all get along?" I will ask, can't we get some work done and save the disagreements for matters of substance? Perhaps the next conversation I have about the Commission's work could be about what the Commission should say or do. Wouldn't that be nice?

I moved over the summer. I can be reached at (415) 383-6139 (home); (415) 389-1440 (home fax) if you have any thoughts on AIDS policy.