

The Stigma of HIV

My usual morning routine includes watching the Today Show as I get ready for work. That was the case on Wednesday morning, November 18th when Matt Lauer announced that later in the program actor Charlie Sheen would make an appearance and reveal some important information. This peaked my interest.

Like many people, I watched Hollywood's bad boy self-destruct a few years back, succumbing to the combined temptations of sex, drugs, and alcohol and, as a result, losing his lucrative starring role in the TV sitcom, *Two and a Half Men*. He subsequently appeared to clean up his act and successfully resurrected his acting career. I wondered what could possibly be the latest saga in the actor's true-life melodrama. I delayed my departure to watch the interview.

Sheen announced that he was HIV positive, a diagnosis he's kept secret for four years. My first thought was, "Why is he announcing this to the world now?" A few minutes into the interview, his motivations became obvious – they were financial and legal.

He told Lauer that he was the victim of numerous blackmail scams by women with whom he had been sexually intimate. Sheen alleged he always informed his sexual partners about his HIV status. Some had threatened to go public with this information unless he paid them to keep quiet. In total, he estimated he had paid out over 10 million dollars to keep their lips sealed.

By going public with this information, Sheen obviously hopes to stop the ongoing blackmail scams and to prevent similar attempts in the future.

However, as he stems the flow of blackmail payments, he opens the door to a possible flood of civil lawsuits and even criminal prosecutions that could cost him millions in legal fees and civil damage payouts, and ultimately, his freedom. Undoubtedly, he conferred with a battalion of lawyers, accountants, and public relation consultants before making this very public announcement. Apparently, the scale tipped in favor of public disclosure and legal challenges against potentially endless, and costly, blackmail shakedowns.

After Sheen's announcement, I pondered the social and legal implications of his disclosure. As to the social implications, Sheen apparently feared public knowledge of his HIV status could undermine his career.

I am amazed that the stigma of an HIV diagnosis remains so intense in Hollywood or, indeed, anywhere else. After all, such high-profile celebrities as Olympian diver, Greg Luganis, tennis great Arthur Ashe, and basketball powerhouse Magic Johnson had long ago blazed the trail of public pronouncements concerning their HIV status.

On second thought though, I realized that each had gone public with the information only after they had reached the pinnacle of success. Sheen, as a 50 year-old actor, potentially has many more productive years ahead.

Since Sheen's announcement, the implications of an HIV diagnosis have been the fodder of unbridled speculation by celebrity journalists and lawyers. In an apparent attempt to keep the social discussion within the confines of sound medical research, within hours of Sheen's announcement, Lambda Legal, a non-profit organization renowned for its work of behalf of HIV and AIDs patients, published an on-line article entitled, "Things you should know before discussing Charlie Sheen's HIV status."

Within the article, the author, Scott Schoettes, made the following points:

- Great progress has been made in treating HIV over the past 25 years. With early diagnosis and proper and consistent medical care, those with HIV can live long and productive lives. They have a life expectancy only a few months shorter than those without HIV.
- Without any precautions, the chance of spreading HIV in a single sexual contact is less than 2%. With certain preventative measures, the risk can be reduced to near 0%.
- Recent studies indicate that regular sexual partners of mixed HIV status may almost completely eliminate the risk of spreading the virus between themselves with new treatment options. One new medication works to lower the HIV partner's viral load to a level where transmitting HIV to non-HIV sexual partner is no longer possible. Also, the healthy partner can take daily doses of an antiretroviral HIV medication that works to prevent the acquisition of HIV. Success depends on early detection and faithfully taking the medication as prescribed.
- While the voluntary disclosure of a positive HIV status is a best health practice, publicly shaming, punishing, and discriminating against an HIV positive person who chooses not to disclose the diagnosis to others is not an effective way to

address HIV/AIDS concerns. Such actions will only cause people to avoid getting tested for HIV and drive those who are infected underground.

I am hopeful that Schoettes' article will promote a civil and logical discussion on HIV and prepare readers for next week's column on the legal implications of an HIV diagnosis.