

**ACT UP Philadelphia • New York City AIDS Housing Network
Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) • Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP)
National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association**

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Health Organizations and AIDS Organizations Denounce Sen. Frist's Inaccurate and Harmful Comments about HIV Transmission, Condom Effectiveness

AIDS Activists Demand Apology and Retraction—or Resignation

AIDS organizations and people living with HIV/AIDS today demanded Sen. Frist (R-TN), the Senate Majority Leader and a medical doctor, apologize for and retract inaccurate statements regarding HIV transmission made on ABC's "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" December 5, 2004. After telling Stephanopoulos he "didn't know" if HIV could be transmitted through tears or sweat, Dr. Frist went on to say that transmission of HIV through tears or sweat "would be very hard I mean, you can get virus in tears and sweat but in terms of the degree of infecting somebody, it would be very hard." (NOTE: full transcript pasted below.)

But according to the Centers for Disease Control, "[c]ontact with saliva, tears, or sweat has never been shown to result in transmission of HIV."

"A doctor takes an oath to do no harm," said Waheedah El-Shabazz, a person living with HIV from ACT UP Philadelphia. "A simple 'no' was the responsible answer. We are working on the front lines, trying to correct dangerous myths about HIV transmission. But Dr. Frist's comments endorse these myths and undermine our efforts to protect people from HIV infection. He should be sent back to medical school if he can't get his facts straight about HIV transmission."

In 2004 alone the Bush Administration's spent \$170 million in the U.S. and \$86 million in developing countries on "abstinence only" prevention programs. Recent analysis by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) has shown these programs teach inaccurate and misleading information. (See: www.democrats.reform.house.gov/investigations.asp?Issue=Public+Health)

According to the activists, Dr. Frist was so unwilling to be seen calling the veracity of those Administration-endorsed programs into question, he refused to provide a clear answer. "Unfortunately the Bush Administration is not only using public money to spread inaccurate HIV prevention information at home and abroad—politicians like Dr. Frist are also bending over backwards to reinforce these dangerous myths," said Jodi Jacobson, Executive Director of the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE).

During the interview Dr. Frist also stated that condoms have a "15% failure rate," another inaccurate comment. According to peer-reviewed studies, consistent and correct condom use is associated with a much smaller failure rate, about 2%. For people who use condoms inconsistently or incorrectly, failure rates can reach 13%.

--BEGIN TRANSCRIPT--

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) Okay, let me switch to another subject. There was a bit of an uproar in Washington this week about this issue of these abstinence programs that are funded by the Federal government, the funding has

doubled over the last four years but there was a report by the minority staff at the House Government Affairs Committee that showed that 11 of 13 of these programs are giving out false information. I want to show some of the claims they identified in the curricula. One of them was, one of the programs taught that "The actual ability of condoms to prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS, even if the product is intact, is not definitively known." Another, "The popular claim that condoms help prevent the spread of STDs is not supported by the data." A third suggested that tears and sweat could transmit HIV and AIDS. Now, you're a doctor. Do you believe that tears and sweat can transmit HIV?

SENATOR BILL FRIST

I don't know. I can tell you ...

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) You don't know?

SENATOR BILL FRIST

I can tell you things like, like ...

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) Well, wait, let me stop you, you don't know that, you believe that tears and sweat might be able to transmit AIDS?

SENATOR BILL FRIST

Yeah, no, I can tell you that HIV is not very transmissible as an element like, compared to smallpox, compared to the flu.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) No, let's talk. I want to talk about all of it.

SENATOR BILL FRIST

But about, about condoms, for example. We know there's about a 15 percent failure rate. You know, this is a deadly virus and you know it is directly transmissible with a relatively high degree of infectivity by, by sexual relations. If there's a 15 percent failure rate in, in condoms ...

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) But this was suggesting that they don't work even if the condom is intact.

SENATOR BILL FRIST

Oh, I know. But, but let me just say because the whole, the whole success, if you look in Africa today where as you know 28 million people are infected today is on this ABC, abstinence which is sort of the initial thrust itself which is the only way to prevent, only way to prevent.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) Only surefire way.

SENATOR BILL FRIST

That's right. Only surefire. Very hard culturally in lots of approaches. Being faithful. Again, one partner and in certain cultures that is very hard and, then third, condoms. If you take out just condoms and say that is the answer with the 15 percent failure rate with a highly infective virus through sexual relations ...

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) These are suggesting that they're really never the answer.

SENATOR BILL FRIST

No, well, clearly. I'm telling you that the proposal that the Federal government supports is officially this A, B, C approach, we put \$15 billion into this, what I would regard as one of the great moral and public health tragedies of the last 100 years, probably HIV/AIDS.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) But do you think these abstinence programs should be reviewed and that they should be required to give out scientifically accurate information?

SENATOR BILL FRIST

Oh, I think of course they should be reviewed, I mean, and that's in part our responsibility to make sure that all of these programs are reviewed but whether it's abstinence or whether it's condoms or whether it is better education on the infectivity of how washing hands in terms of the flu, all of these are public health challenges that we need in terms of better education, yes, the government has a role, especially if we're gonna be ...

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) Let me just, I wanted to move to another subject, let me just clear this up, though. Do you or do you not believe that tears and sweat can transmit HIV?

SENATOR BILL FRIST

It would be very hard. It would be very hard for tears and sweat, I mean, you can get virus in tears and sweat but in terms of the degree of infecting somebody, it would be very hard.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

(Off Camera) Okay, let me turn to one final subject, steroids...