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The New Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Reproductive Health

It's been rumored that when Sen. Joe Biden announced to the audience at a recent presidential debate that both he and Sen. Barack Obama had been tested for HIV, the collective gasp pulled paint off the auditorium walls at Howard University.

"I got tested for AIDS -- I know Barack got tested for AIDS," Biden said. "There's no shame in being tested for AIDS. It's an important thing."

The statement prompted Obama to explain that he and his wife were tested during a 2006 visit to Kenya to encourage others to follow in their footsteps. Biden then clarified he had been tested following a blood transfusion.

It is unclear if this exchange garnered so much media attention because of the "clean and articulate" participants or because it is one of the few times the presidential hopefuls of either party have broached the subject of reproductive health without bringing up abortion.

Potential voters willing to scour the tubes of the internet can locate information indicating candidates' stances on various reproductive health topics. For instance, in response to a survey from the Human Rights Campaign (PDF file) the Democratic hopefuls all said they would support funding for the Ryan White Care Act to provide access to life-saving treatment and care for more than half a million low-income Americans with HIV/AIDS, increasing funding for HIV/AIDS prevention and research, and passage of the Responsible Education About Life Act to channel money to comprehensive and age-appropriate science-based sexual education. Visits to candidate web sites -- if the viewer is willing to sift through health care, education and foreign policy plans -- can provide more snippets of information. On the campaign trail, even in the political

powerhouse state of Iowa, candidates rarely include basic reproductive health statements in stump speeches.

"We do our best to allow time for citizens to ask questions at events," said Tom Reynolds, Iowa communications director for Gov. Bill Richardson. "Questions about reproductive health, in general, have not been asked."

While Reynolds does not paint a rosy picture for reproductive health advocates, his statement is nonetheless true. In looking over notes from candidate events held in Iowa from January 2007 to present, Iraq and the war have dominated the question and answer periods of all presidential candidates, regardless of party. A full 63 percent of all questions recorded in this journalist's notebook have been either directly related to the war or encompass foreign relations policy in the Middle East. Coming in second are questions related to defense and domestic spending, due in large part to the efforts of bird-doggers for Iowans for Sensible Priorities. General health care questions including topics ranging from insurance company woes to impact of undocumented workers on hospitals rank third. Of the questions relating to health care, over 80 percent focused directly on cost and coverage.

Although questions about poverty, especially those instigated by the ONE Campaign, sometimes result in discussion of funding increases for AIDS, drug-resistant tuberculosis and malaria, they most often end in plans relating to Katrina-like disasters where most victims lived at or below poverty levels.

It is nearly a given that in each stump speech the audience will hear a one- or two-sentence sound bite relating to the candidate's stance on abortion. Outside of that hot-button issue, however, reproductive health appears only faintly in conversations of health care, education or foreign policy.

Realizing the impact political sound bytes from Iowa and New Hampshire can have -- if not on the presidential election itself, then on the national conversation on the issues -- many groups with a particular focus have set up shop in the granite and hawkeye states. Using both paid staff and volunteers, the groups have made a point of attending all kinds of candidate events and posing scripted questions relating to the group's specific purpose. Because

of this, it is difficult to gauge whether Iowa citizens are unconcerned about reproductive issues or if their individual voices have been over-shadowed by special interest groups.

At the end of the day, however, if Americans want to know how the candidates feel on specific issues, their best bet is to not rely on national news outlets and to do the legwork themselves.

http://www.essentialestrogen.com/2007/07/reproductive_health_the_new_do.html