A Study’s Positive Pulse (1 Letter)

To the Editor:

Re “Epidemics: AIDS Cases Increasing in Muslim Countries” (Global Update, Aug. 8): We recently published in PLoS Medicine our study documenting emerging H.I.V. epidemics among men who have sex with men in the Middle East and North Africa (M.E.N.A.). Your article on the study conveyed a message that the socio-cultural context of M.E.N.A., and specifically Islam, is behind the rising H.I.V. epidemics, in difference to the actual findings of our study. H.I.V. epidemics occur all over the world, and the socio-cultural background of this region is one of the factors that contributed to one of the lowest H.I.V. rates globally.

The article suggests that governments and community leaders are in denial of the health problems because of cultural taboos. While we acknowledge that there is ample room for improved public health policy in this region, the fact that we were able to conduct a study on one of the most sensitive issues in M.E.N.A. speaks to the progress that civil society and governments have achieved in recent years. The article failed to acknowledge the positive and forward pulse of our study, and tainted this region instead in a negative light.

The Times, and often other Western media, seems fixated in linking the socio-cultural background of this region to social and health ills. This misrepresentation of this part of humanity, and its inherent geopolitics of exclusion, corrode the bridges of communication for a constructive dialogue between the West and the Islamic world. When will Western media view the challenges in this part of the world not through the “exceptionalism of Muslims,” but through an appreciation of the global human condition?

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