

STACY SCHIFF

Sex and the Single-Minded

How to get a job in Washington, that balmy, bipartisan town: Direct an organization that opposes contraception on the grounds that it is “de-meaning to women.” Compare premarital sex to heroin addiction. Advertise a link between breast cancer and abortion — a link that was refuted in 1997. Rant against sex ed. And hatch a loony theory about hormones.

You’re a shoo-in, and if your name is Eric Keroack you’re in your second month as deputy assistant secretary for population affairs at the De-

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TimesSelect: Guest Columnist: Domestic Disturbances Judith Warner looks at the “epidemic” of children’s mental health issues: nytimes.com/opinion.
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partment of Health and Human Services. Dr. Keroack, a 46-year-old Massachusetts ob-gyn, today oversees the \$280 million Title X program, the only federal program “designed to provide access to contraceptive supplies and information to all who want and need them, with priority given to low-income persons.”

It’s not a job that plays to Dr. Keroack’s talents, which happen to be prodigious. In the PowerPoint presentation that has cemented his reputation, he makes the case that premarital sex suppresses the hormone oxytocin, thereby impairing one’s ability to forge a successful long-term relationship. If forced to mince words you might call this fanciful or speculative. Otherwise you’d call it wacko. “Really, really scary” and “utterly hilarious” were the first two reactions I heard from scientists.

Each of us owes a rather critical debt to oxytocin. It’s what moves a new mother to comfort and nurse a squalling baby rather than to toss it from the window, as common sense might dictate. It is — you knew your husband was missing something — the hormone of intimacy. (No, you

can’t buy supplements across the border. And yes, OxyContin is something different. Rush Limbaugh was not working on his bonding instincts.)

Louann Brizendine, a neuropsychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, calls oxytocin the Glinda the Good Witch of her field. It is the drug of trust and partnership and attachment, commonly known by their street name: love. Oxytocin mellows, elates, and throws you into a mental fog. Rats prefer it to cocaine. While the rush at childbirth is particularly dramatic, the hormone swells with physical and emotional bonding of all kinds.

“Surge” has not always been a dirty word.

But no one has had as much good, clean fun with oxytocin as Dr. Keroack, for whom it is “God’s superglue.” Extrapolating in part from research with prairie voles, which are monogamous, he postulates that oxytocin cannot survive too much sex, at least with multiple partners, at least prior to marriage. By way of demonstration he proposes the duct tape test: you need only an adhesive

and a hairy arm. The tape represents the brain. Press it down. Now reapply. See what happens? Less sticky, right? Concludes Keroack: “Basically, you will end up damaging your brain’s ability to use the oxytocin system as a chemical mechanism that serves to help you successfully bond in future relationships.” Don’t

Junk science from the birth-control bureaucracy.

ask about his illustrations. They are offensive.

Keroack presents this as gospel truth, though the scientists on whose research he bases his theory balk. One called it a wild leap. “A bungee jump without a cord,” suggested another expert. Dr. Brizendine had a less kind word for it. She adds that while premarital sex cannot ruin your oxytocin response, it has been

shown — in the absence of options — to ruin your life. Something tells me that Dr. Keroack is not planning a 34th anniversary bash on Monday for Roe v. Wade.

I know what you’re thinking: if Dr. Keroack can write stuff this outlandish he’s spelling his name wrong. As the other Kerouac said — arguably with a firmer grasp of neurochemistry — “I had nothing to offer anybody but my own confusion.” Dr. Keroack may want to borrow the disclaimer that prefaces Michael Crichton’s newest best-seller: “This novel is fiction, except for the parts that aren’t.” It takes an agenda rather than a medical degree to engage in this kind of science. Or an imagination.

In all fairness, Dr. Keroack has long been a little clumsy as an analogist. In a 2001 letter to the Massachusetts Legislature he explained the logic of performing sonograms on women considering abortion: “Even Midas lets you look at your old muffler before they advise you to change it.”

There are many ways to define de-meaning. □