

THE HIDDEN PAST OF HIV: THE UNSURE FUTURE

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"There was no apparent danger to nonhomosexuals" - Dr. James Curran, spokesman for the CDC, New York Times, July 3, 1981

Currently, 40 millions people suffer from HIV around the world. Approximately 5 million were diagnosed with HIV in 2003. In the same year, about 2.3 million people died from . Yet, not all these 40 million people are homosexuals. An estimated 50% of HIV positive individuals are women. 2.5 million are children under the age of 15. These statistics are reported in all major news media and echoed throughout school systems. Men and women alike are educated as to the dangers of this relentless virus. The essential information regarding HIV and AIDS is easy to obtain, at least for Americans and other First World Nations. School systems around the country provide sexual education where HIV, among other STDs, are addressed. Numerous groups including AIDS Action and ACT UP dedicate themselves to HIV research and education, which international agreement falls upon the need to address the raging AIDS crisis around the world. Though ignorance about HIV and AIDS still exists, this essay intends to address the less advertised history of HIV; a history that reflects almost a decade worth of prejudice and government silence. Then, I will bring the essay into the contemporary setting where prejudice, fear, and ethical debates still continue to dominate the debate on how to combat the onslaught of this relentless virus.

Starting around 1978, gay men in the United States and Sweden were showing signs of HIV, while heterosexuals in Tanzania and Haiti were also getting sick. In 1980, 31 Americans died of AIDS, entering into increased cases of the cancer, Kaposi's Sarcoma, which spreads more easily in HIV-positive individuals. Lawrence K. Altman's

New York Times article, published on July 3, 1981, was the first mass media attention to an early health concern then only found in gay men. The initial evidence ran a fine line as to what caused the increased cancer rates. Often, cancer breaks out in small clusters of people because of unique stimuli like environmental factors or viruses. Dr. Alvin E. Friedman-Kien of New York University Medical Center told the New York Times that these patients admitted to being homosexual and “have had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners, as many as 10 sexual encounters each night up to four times a week.”ⁱ These patients also had to be treated for other STD infections including hepatitis B, cytomegalovirus (CMV), and herpes. Additionally, the men said they used a variety of drugs to increase sexual pleasure. Dr. Friedman-Kien said there was indirect evidence to say the cancer was not caused by some contagion, being that the patients did not know each other, though it was possible that these men had had sexual contact with other men also infected. Dr. Friedman-Kien noted severe immunological deficiencies in the nine patients he tested. He stressed the lack of research on the condition, unsure whether the immunological defects had caused the cancer or whether they had occurred as a result of another infection or drug use. Researchers began investigating a possible link with CMV and Kaposi’s Sarcoma.

Dr. James Curran, the spokesman for the CDC, held the belief that this cancer trigger only affected homosexuals, claiming that heterosexuals were not at risk. He said “the best evidence [is] against contagion...no cases have been reported to date outside the homosexual community or in women.”ⁱⁱ Thus, the CDC coined the outbreak the “gay cancer,” later calling it GRID, the Gay Related Immuno Deficiency. Nevertheless, prior

to the New York Times article, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report on June 5th, 1981, published by the Center for Disease Control, found 5 cases of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP) in previous healthy, young men who identify as homosexual. Two died. The local health organizations that notified the CDC's experts on parasitic and sexually transmitted diseases. They noted the possibility of "cellular-immune dysfunction related to a common exposure" and a "disease acquired through sexual contact."ⁱⁱⁱ Subsequent cases followed.

This information on the PCP cases was taken from an MMWR reported dated June 1st, 2001. Within the 28 page document, statistics and historical information of HIV is presented, yet there is not mention of the early link between Kaposi's Sarcoma and HIV, nor is the name GRID mentioned. Likewise, after searching GRID on the CDC's website, I found 675 hits, but not one referring to the Gay Related Immuno Deficiency. GRID and gay produced no hits nor did GRID and AIDS. GRID and HIV produced one hit, but the page did not contain a reference.

The aforementioned MMWR accounts for a specifically viral connection to HIV, which was investigated as being an STD. The CDC's initial discrepancy over the "gay cancer" was only made worse by a lack of national attention. The MMWR for November 5th, 1982 announced AIDS and precautionary steps for clinicians and laboratory staff. When listing the causes for the virus, the MMWR said AIDS "require[s] intimate, direct contact involving mucosal surfaces, such as sexual contact among homosexual males, or through parenteral spread, such as occurs among intravenous drug abusers and possibly hemophilia patients."^{iv} Heterosexuals are not listed as a risk group. The name change

from GRID to AIDS seems more of a result from the infection of intravenous drug users than regular, heterosexual cases.

Also in 1982, the Gay Men's Health Crisis is founded, much in response to AIDS. 1,614 cases had been diagnosed in the United States and 619 have died. President Ronald Reagan has yet to mention AIDS to the public. President Reagan would not mention AIDS to the public until 1987, after 71,176 people already had AIDS in the United States, and 41,027 had already died.

In 1983, research and concern for AIDS started to increase. The CDC warned blood banks of a possibly contagion in the blood supply. The Institut Pasteur in France discovered the virus that causes HIV, followed by Dr. Robert Gallo in 1984, who claimed to have originally discovered the virus. The computer program Opus BBS was the first to donate 100% of its proceeds to AIDS research and care.

Major turning points were achieved in 1985. The FDA approved the first HIV antibody test; blood products started being tested in the United States and Japan; the first annual International Conference on AIDS was held in Atlanta, Georgia; and the first play about AIDS opened in New York, *The Normal Heart*, by Larry Kramer. One most influential event for the AIDS movement was Rock Hudson's announcement that he had AIDS. The famed movie star and sex icon died on October 2nd, 1985 after desperately seeking a cure. His announcement and death gave AIDS, which the public considered only a problem for homosexuals and intravenous drug users, a famous face. Rock Hudson also revealed his homosexuality, which showed that AIDS and homosexuality affected the general public. The entertainment industry, much pioneered by Hudson's

close friend, Elizabeth Taylor, headed most of the early AIDS education. Furthermore, Liberace's death from AIDS provided additional public concern for the virus being that numerous older, conservatives, especially women, loved Liberace and Rock Hudson. In 1986, US Surgeon General Everett Koop issued a report on AIDS calling for sex education. Also, ultra-conservative Roy Cohen, the chief counsel to Joseph McCarthy during the Red Scare, died of AIDS.

Finally, in 1987, President Reagan addressed the AIDS issue at a speech to the Philadelphia College of Physicians. He called for a small federal role in AIDS education saying "as long as they teach that one of the answers to it is abstinence - if you say it's not how you do it, but that you don't do it." Reagan, supported by Vice-President George Bush, wanted mandatory HIV testing for Americans, which responded in incredible backlash. At the 3rd International Conference on AIDS, Vice-President Bush was booed when he brought up the topic. Demonstrators outside were arrested by police wearing full-length, yellow gloves. Dr. Robert M Wachter, a medical professor from the University of California, referred to the influence of the arrests in his book, *the Fragile Coalition*.

On the nightly news broadcasts, the world saw pictures of demonstrators being arrested by police wearing bright yellow, arm-length gloves. Although research had by now proved that the AIDS virus could not be passed through casual contact, the sight of the gloves served to reinforce the public's general overestimation of the risk of HIV transmission (Wachter).

The more public opinion feared AIDS, the less the federal government cared to involve itself. Only after a number of celebrities died from AIDS did President Reagan mention

the virus and address any form of solution. The United States stopped allowing HIV-positive immigrants from entering the country. Additionally, the FDA approved AZT, the first anti-HIV drug approved by the organization. In 1988, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop released a pamphlet, "Understanding AIDS."

Nevertheless, the support came in small bursts of loose drug policies and strict blood screening. Conservative religious groups and political leaders resisted involving the U.S. government in education that referenced intravenous drug use and explicit sexual information. AIDS education, up until the mid-nineties, was conducted by private organizations, the liberal media, and entertainers. A notable performance came from Madonna in 1987, where she donated a percentage of ticket sales to AIDS research in addition to showing images of Ronald Reagan with the words safe sex written. The images addressed the President's lack of involvement with the virus.

By the mid-nineties, AIDS had infected half a million Americans and killed almost a third of a million. Finally, though, public opinion was swaying in favor of AIDS education. With prominent figures such as Magic Johnson revealing he was HIV-positive, AIDS found a heterosexual icon to show the virus was more than a "gay plague." Since healthy heterosexuals had reason for concern, AIDS education and funding became a standard part of America's sexual education.

How much recent developments have helped prevent AIDS from spreading are uncertain. AIDS continues to increase each year, especially in African nations. 25 million, more than half of the total HIV-positive people in the world, are living in the

southern part of Africa where condoms are rarer and sexual education is almost non-existent. The nation, Zambia, has banned condom distribution and education, claiming that they promote immoral behavior. 1 in 5 people in Zambia is HIV-positive.

President George W. Bush, in his 2003 State of the Union address, committed \$15 billion to fight AIDS, \$10 billion in new money. He supports the recently tested prevention method ABC, which has been claimed to have caused drastic drops in HIV cases in Uganda. The ABC method calls for abstinence, be loyal to your partner, and then condoms when neither A or B will work. Scientists debate the effectiveness of this method, though support is increasing due to the method's inexpensive and simple execution capabilities. A Harvard professor recently wrote a book promoting the topic. On the record, President Bush has pushed for exclusive abstinence education in schools, with rumors about condom information being removed from government websites. Though the information is still there, Bush's track record on AIDS contradicts his recent proposal.

When appointing members to the Presidential Advisory Commission on HIV and AIDS, Bush nominated Jerry Thacker, an devout Christian, who contracted HIV from his wife who got it through a blood transfusion. Thacker withdraw himself from the nominees after gay activists protested Thacker for referring to AIDS as the "gay plague" and homosexuality as a "death style" on the Bob Jones University website. Furthermore, as the governor of Texas, within his first sixty months, Bush had yet to mention AIDS. Texas had the fourth highest number of AIDS cases in the country. Don Maison, executive director of AIDS Services of Dallas, said "through the context of funding on

AIDS and HIV and through two legislative sessions that we've been through with him, there's no AIDS record.” A Texas official who oversaw policymaking regarding AIDS and HIV was quoted in Salon.com under anonymity as saying “in my ... years [in this position], I have not heard AIDS addressed publicly” by Bush. When Daphna Ziman, the chairwoman of Children Uniting Nations, sent a letter to every state governor requesting feedback or resources for the AIDS in Africa, every governor responded, except Bush. Ziman said:

Forty nine governors responded, including [Bush's] brother. I mean, it's a crisis for everyone. Ten million children with AIDS, can you imagine? One governor helped to arrange the shipment of 100,000 basketballs. Gray Davis offered me the support from the medical facilities at UCLA. We sent Bush the letter twice. A letter and a fax. We didn't want to take a chance.^v

The response to AIDS has improved. Numerous vaccines are at various stages in testing, though the head of the United Nation's AIDS prevention program said there is likely a 10 year wait. A vaccine may be the only way to defeat the AIDS epidemic. In the interim, HIV cases are skyrocketing, even with education and protection. A gay subculture, called Bug Chasers, has formed where contracting HIV is erotic and sought after. A Rolling Stone article broke the trend to the mass media, but to criticism calling the article “a hit piece, meant to be shocking.”^{vi} Dr. Bob Cabaj of the San Francisco Department of Health was cited saying up to 25% of new AIDS cases occurred this way. Numerous sources quoted Cabaj denying his quotes saying the numbers used were “totally false.” He also said he told the fact-checker to remove the statistics. Dr. Michael Siever of the San Francisco General Hospital believes the subculture exists, but in small

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amounts. “It makes me angry how little people check their facts,”^{vii} he said. “Certainly, it feeds the right-wing craziness around ‘[gays deserve this].’”^{viii} Other subcultures, like the Down Low, include black men who sleep with men, often without protection, and then infect their wives or girlfriends. And in Africa, the virus runs rampant amid a largely ignorant population. History has shown silence does not solve problems. And AIDS is showing a strong resistance to current combative techniques. Now we need to stop AIDS and its attempt to defeat us.

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