

LIFELINE

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GETTING TO ZERO

This is the theme of World AIDS Day 2011. The goal of the campaign is to get to zero. Zero AIDS related deaths. Zero new HIV infections. Zero discrimination. Goals that may sound unlikely to reach but goals that are attainable if the focus of the world can be directed to this situation and the efforts of the world leaders are determined to bring it to reality.

Each year new and exciting medical break-throughs come out giving a promise and hope that we are getting closer to a cure. While that goal has not been achieved we have seen better medicines and treatments giving way to longer life spans with a better quality of life than before. Knowledge of healthier life styles and nutrition are increasing the life experience as well. With each new discovery the hope stays alive that life can be full and healthy. One need only to look back 30 years ago when an AIDS diagnosis was a death sentence and life expectancy was counted in weeks.

Emotional health also plays an important role in healthier living. Holistic healing, mediation, yoga and reiki are showing significant signs of improving life, leading to the thinking that a healthy mind helps keep the body in a healthy state. There has been so much research involving alternative therapies and living with HIV over the past three decades and with the proper medications, balanced meals, exercise and mental state people are living much better lives. So, zero AIDS related deaths are not too far fetched.

A sad reality of the HIV period in time is new infections. Thirty years ago when it was discovered that one of the means of transmission was unprotected sex, there were major campaigns in getting out the message that this disease is preventable with the use of condoms. Free condoms were in candy dishes everywhere from nightclubs to boutiques. And for the most part the message was accepted and the cases of new infections noticeably dropped. However over the years with the better treatments and lifestyle adjustments along with the longevity of people living with HIV, the fear of contracting HIV has seemed to diminish. A cavalier outlook to being infected took hold in the thinking that it is treatable with medications and there is nothing to worry about. Part of the success in the treatment of HIV has become its worse enemy.

The age group in the rise of the newly infected is 18 to 29 years of age and mostly in men having sex with men. This generation has never know life without AIDS so why then are they now the ones in most danger? Some may say that it is because the message is barely visible and compared to 25 –30 years ago and that is true. There is an increase in the porn industry depicting unprotected sex acts, sending out a mixed message to the young men of this category. But on a scarier note there is the thinking that some would just like to get infected just to have to stop worrying about getting infected. There have been stories of “gifting” parties where men of every status have unprotected sex to pass along the disease as a badge of courage. Then there is the curiosity of wanting to know what sex is like without a shield of latex between two people.

Many factors make up the various explanations of why there are new infections in a situation that is totally preventable, but the message here is not the why but how. How can we as a society get the message back out there to our younger generations and to the older generations as well? Yes, another sector of the population having an explosion of infections is the seniors. Men and women in the golden years without the fear of pregnancy are have unprotected sex. Along with the popularity and success of Viagra, they are having more of it.

HIV does not discriminate on any level and everyone is at risk. Even if one is celibate there is at risk with needle sharing, organ transplants, blood transfusions and a number of other means of transmission. While the medical industry takes

extreme measures to screen for HIV in its practices, it still has happened. But it is not to say that zero new infections are out of the question but it will take the effort of many to get the message out and the attention of many to adhere to it.

But perhaps the most elusive zero might be discrimination and stigma. It is hard to believe that after thirty years of living beside the AIDS epidemic the stigma attached to this still exists. No other ailment has been so discriminated against since the black plague. It's unfathomable to think that the transmission of this disease is so despised that people would isolate themselves from friends and family. It is not the first time a virus was transmitted via sexual intercourse or drug abuse yet it carries a fear that is almost worse as the disease itself.

The stigma of AIDS has ruined marriages, family relationships, friendships and jobs. And why? Homosexuality has become more acceptable over the past three decades, which is evident in the legalization of same sex marriages in some states and countries. There is compassion for people addicted to drugs, with numerous agencies helping people to kick the habit and stay clean, yet throw the AIDS component into the mix and it becomes another scenario. It makes not logical sense but it is alive and wrecking havoc on those who live with HIV.

For certain, not everyone is HIV-phobic, thankfully for that. There are negative/positive relationships that are alive and well. There are compassionate people working in the HIV/AIDS arena, which is evident in organizations such as ours. And more friends and family members have become less fearful and accepting than ever before. But there is still a large portion of the population that has stigmatized this into an uncomfortable situation. How do we get the message out that this is an illness, no different than any other illnesses? People living with breast cancer, heart problems, mental illness or any number of diseases do not have to contend with their illness and a stigma at the same time.

One radical approach to combat the stigma would be to put a face on it...a real face, your face. This approach is not an easy one and not recommended for everyone. Much like Michael Jordan did so many years ago he "came out" to the world that he was HIV positive. It gave the disease a recognizable face that the general public could relate to. A face that they could have compassion for and a face that they could say, "That could be me". When the person living with HIV hides the fact, it gives the fear wings. If there is something that the positive person feels shameful about then certainly the shame is justified. There are too many factors why the person living with HIV stays in the shadows and for their personal reasons "coming out" of the HIV closet could have many consequences. Therefore, this is not any easy solution to eradicate the stigma but for many folks declaring to their friends and family proved to be a good thing. Sadly, however, that is not the case for everyone.

Over the years several stigmatized portions of the population took radical approaches to dealing with their dilemmas. The African American population battled racism with the same words that were being thrown at them. They adopted the term Black American in replace of the Civil War era term of Negro. By renaming themselves, it empowered them to be their own people with their own identity. They even took the most hurtful term, the "N" word and used it in everyday language to remove the sting of it. Years later the Gay Rights movement did the same thing by taking the hurtful punch out of words like "queer" and "faggot" and demeaning the terms to the point that when used in a derogatory manner it somehow does not have the same effect it once had. None of these measures came easily and it took years to overcome the stigmas but if you look at the strides that both of these groups have accomplished it takes your breath away. We have an African American President and in some states it's legal to be married to the same sex.

So when you look at what it will take to remove the stigma from the HIV Community it will begin with the courage of the men and women living with this condition and their tenacity to look the opposition in the face and say, "I am human. I have the same rights as you and I will not be denied." With the support of their friends, family and the folks who work in the HIV community the day of being stigma-free is not far off. In the meantime, we must look inside our own hearts and minds and think about what each one of us can do to diminish this problem. It will take the concerted effort of the whole population to finally say enough is enough and let us just take care of one another and stop the madness of underlining our differences as if one group is better than the next. But then, isn't this the solution to many of the problems of the world today? So simple, yet so out of reach.

Let's get to zero. After three decades of dealing with HIV/AIDS we have learned do much while at the same time done so little. This disease can be prevented, yet people are having unprotected sex and fight the use of condoms in the adolescent population. Clean needles for drug-addicted people would stop the spread as well yet that too is fought. Lastly, treating people with the dignity and respect they deserve and the compassion they need is only human. If it were you...you would want it also.

Getting to zero starts with you and what you do to spread the word and live the meaning of your actions.

The History of World AIDS Day

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(CANVAS STAFF REPORTS) - For 22 years, people have taken December 1 to remember those who died from the AIDS pandemic.

World AIDS Day is a day to remember not only people who have passed on and those who continue to live with it, but take note of those fighting to find a cure.

The [World Health Organization](#) started World AIDS Day in 1988 and the International AIDS Society was formed the same year. The organization [World AIDS Campaign](#) said the next year Congress created the National Commission on AIDS as World AIDS Day centered around the theme “Our Lives, Our World – Let's Take Care of Each Other.”

It had been about six years since scientists first called the new disease Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, according to [Infoplease.com](#) . It had originally been referred to as “gay cancer,” a name that would not cover the other ways that the disease is spread.

Today much of the message is spread online. The [Good Men Project Magazine](#) said Lady Gaga, Justin Timberlake, Usher and other celebrities logged off their Facebook and Twitter on Wednesday. It is a symbolic “digital death” as fans are challenged to raise \$1 million through the non-profit organization [Keep a Child Alive](#) ,” which supports children and families in developing nations living with HIV and AIDS.

“We're trying to sort of make the remark: Why do we care so much about the death of one celebrity as opposed to millions and millions of people dying in the place that we're all from?” Leigh Blake, the charity's co-founder and president, told [The Daily Tell](#) .

Good Men Magazine said social media is becoming a powerful tool in efforts to reduce stigma about the disease as victims and advocates tweet their pleas for donations and thoughts on the latest research.

[AIDS.gov](#) asked people to take self-portraits while holding cards saying why they are “Facing AIDS.” They submitted them through online photo sharing website [Flickr](#) .

Photos include titles such as “I am facing AIDS for those who can no longer face it” and “I'm facing AIDS because stigma is stupid.”

The AIDS/HIV resource website [TheBody.com](#) pleads that one day is not enough. It credited successes such as the first National HIV/AIDS Strategy, the lifting of an HIV travel ban and the debut of the HIV/AIDS documentary “The Other Side.”

Yet the website said there is still little attention paid to the disease by mainstream society.

“We need more coverage about actual people living with HIV, telling their stories on their own terms,” TheBody.com suggests.

To honor the day it suggests wearing a red ribbon, writing a letter to a politician or encouraging peers to be tested for AIDS.

People are encouraged to keep their efforts alive when December 1 ends.

HIV Facts

HIV stands for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It is a virus which attacks the body's immune system — the body's defence against diseases. HIV can be passed on through infected bodily fluids, most commonly via sex without a condom or by sharing infected needles, syringes or other injecting drug equipment. There are now **more people than ever** living with HIV in the UK — more than 90,000 — with around a quarter of those unaware they have the virus. Here are a few more facts about HIV in the UK:

- Over 90% of people with HIV were infected through sexual contact
- You can now get tested for HIV using a saliva sample
- HIV is not passed on through spitting, biting or sharing utensils
- Only 1% of babies born to HIV positive mothers have HIV
- You can get the results of an HIV test in just 15-20 minutes
- There is no vaccine and no cure for HIV

Have any of these facts come as a surprise? There is still loads more you can learn about HIV in the UK by visiting [HIVaware](#) — our fun, interactive new website which provides all the information everyone should know about HIV. [HIVaware](#) gives you facts and stats on HIV, busts common myths and answers your frequently asked questions.

Take your first step to Acting Aware by visiting [HIVaware](#) today.

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