

A Misspent Youth: The HIV/AIDS Crisis Comes of Age

As society approaches the end of the third decade since the first cases of HIV infection were diagnosed, big questions have begun to emerge. HIV, as everyone knows by now, is the virus that can and usually does lead to the disease called AIDS. What everyone perhaps *doesn't* know is the amount of money government wastes each year on HIV/AIDS.

Before you jump to the conclusion that yours truly is a heartless fiend who has taken leave of his senses, please read on. This article is not a plea to abandon efforts to put an end to what is without doubt the worst epidemic since the bubonic plague. If anything, the health of us all hangs in the search for a solution.

The Roots of the Illness

HIV is short for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Viruses are microscopic organisms that have been around for thousands of years. These are the tiny “bugs” that cause colds and illnesses like the flu. Other viruses produce more serious illnesses like hepatitis. Far and away the deadliest virus that ever has or ever will appear is HIV.

What makes HIV so deadly is its host: the body's immune system. This is the system that defends the body against infections and some diseases. HIV attaches itself to healthy immune cells and convinces them to rebel. Ultimately, the immune system grows either too weak to fight off any infection, or it becomes overactive. Either way, the system is out of balance. With an unbalanced immune system, your body is open to illnesses that are virtually unheard of among healthy people.

No Pretty Picture

It is not a pretty picture—a disease that leaves the body defenseless. Of that, there can be no question. Neither is there any question that funding to combat this dreaded disease should and must continue until HIV is beaten.

What is questionable is how that money ought to be spent. This brings us back to the initial point of this article. Misspending for HIV/AIDS research and for the development of curative drugs has been rampant.

Some higher-ups in the health community have expressed contempt for our government's multi-billion dollar AIDS research program, which they see as “lacking focus.” In their view, new ideas are needed to combat HIV. So is new scientific talent to replace a team of researchers who, to date, have tried and failed mightily.

At the same time, proposals for establishing an institute devoted specifically to AIDS seem not to be the answer, in this writer's view. This would just add more government red tape and cost taxpayers more of their hard-earned money. The U.S. currently foots the bill for 85 percent of AIDS research in the world. How much more of a burden should we be willing to undertake as a people and a nation?

What About Those Infected?

Putting aside the issues of a cure or a vaccine, what about the plight of the people currently infected with HIV? The most promising medications are so expensive as to be out of reach to all but the richest HIV/AIDS patients. Shouldn't some of the money earmarked for HIV go toward helping these people get access to state-of-the-art drugs?

At the very least, the government ought to be rallying behind the international group of physicians that call itself Doctors Without Borders. This group has launched an effort to change international laws so that pharmaceutical companies could not make a profit on life-extending HIV medications for which they hold patents.

Teach Your Children Well

Last of all, it's high time that the government put its money where its mouth is. The best defense against HIV is to educate young people on how the virus is spread *before* it is spread. Once every hour, a person in the United States between the ages of 13 and 25 contracts HIV. The only way to prevent catastrophes like this is to teach about behaviors that can lead to infection.

The White House Office on AIDS Policy agrees. In 1996, then-director Patricia Fleming commented, "All of us must do a better job in educating and empowering young people." Yet, since then not a penny of additional funds has been spent to get the word out.