

How has AIDS affected our Society?

Today more Americans are infected with STD's than at any other time in history. The most serious of these diseases is AIDS. Since the first cases were identified in the United States in 1981, AIDS has touched the lives of millions of American families. This deadly disease is unlike any other in modern history. Changes in social behavior can be directly linked to AIDS. Its overall effect on society has been dramatic.

It is unknown whether AIDS and HIV existed and killed in the U.S. and North America before the early 1970s. However in the early 1980s, "deaths by opportunistic infections, previously observed mainly in tissue-transplant recipients receiving immunosuppressive therapy", were recognized in otherwise healthy homosexual men. In 1983 French oncologist Luc Montagnier and scientists at the Pasteur Institute in Paris isolated what appeared to be a new human retrovirus from the lymph node of a man at risk for having AIDS. At the same time, scientists working in the laboratory of American research, scientist Robert Gallo at the National Cancer Institute, one of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, and a group headed by American virologist Jay Levy at the University of California at San Francisco isolated a retrovirus from people with AIDS and from individuals having contact with people with AIDS. All three groups of scientists had isolated what is now known as HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

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In 1995 HIV was estimated to infect almost 20 million people worldwide, and several million of those people had developed AIDS. The disease is obviously an important social issue.

AIDS has caused many to rethink their own social behavior. People are forced to use caution when involving themselves in sexual activity. They must use contraception to avoid the dangers of infection. Many people consider HIV infection and AIDS to be completely preventable because the routes of HIV transmission are so well known. To completely prevent transmission, however, dramatic changes in sexual behavior and drug dependence would have to occur throughout the world. Prevention efforts that promote sexual awareness through open discussion and condom distribution in public schools have been opposed due to fear that these efforts encourage sexual promiscuity among young adults. Similarly, needle-exchange programs have been criticized as promoting drug abuse. Governor Christine Todd Whitman vetoed a bill in New Jersey that tried to create a needle-exchange program. She was accused of being "compassionless". She replied that she could not allow drug addicts to continue to break the law. By distributing needles, she felt that she was, in fact, encouraging them to break the law.

Prevention programs that identify HIV-infected individuals and notify their sexual partners, as well as programs that promote HIV testing at the time of marriage or pregnancy, have been criticized for invading personal privacy.

Efforts aimed at public awareness have been propelled by community-based organizations, such as Project Inform and Act-Up, that provide current information to HIV-infected individuals and to individuals at risk for infection. Public figures and celebrities who are themselves

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HIV-infected or have died from AIDS-including American basketball player Magic Johnson, American actor Rock Hudson, American diver Greg Louganis, American tennis player Arthur Ashe, and British musician Freddie Mercury-have personalized the disease of AIDS and have thereby helped society come to terms with the enormity of the epidemic. In memory of those people who died from AIDS, especially in the early years of the epidemic, a giant quilt project was initiated in which each panel of

the quilt was dedicated to the memory of an individual AIDS death. This quilt has traveled on display from community to community to promote AIDS awareness.

The U.S. government has also attempted to assist HIV-infected individuals through legislation and additional community-funding measures. In 1990 HIV-infected people were included in the Americans with Disabilities Act, making discrimination against these individuals for jobs, housing, and other social benefits illegal. Additionally, a community-funding program designed to assist in the daily lives of people living with AIDS was established. This congressional act, the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act, was named in memory of a young man who contracted HIV through blood products and became a public figure for his courage in fighting the disease and community prejudice. The act is still in place, although continued funding for such social programs is under debate by current legislators. The lack of effective vaccines and antiviral drugs has spurred speculation that the funding for AIDS research is insufficient. Although the actual amount of government funding for AIDS research is large, most of these funds are used for expensive clinical studies to evaluate new

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drugs. Many scientists believe that not enough is known about the basic biology of HIV, and they recommend shifting the emphasis of AIDS research to basic research that could ultimately result in more effective medicines.

Most people agree that AIDS is a very important issue and cannot be ignored. Personally, I believe that the country and society is to blame for the spread of AIDS. We let it get out of control. The modes of transmission have been known for a considerable amount of time, yet the disease still continues to spread. There are few people who can honestly claim not to know the ways in which AIDS is transmitted. Similarly, there are very few people who don't know the ways to prevent the spread of AIDS. These methods are very simple and easy to follow. Yet, thousands will be infected this year alone.

Another aspect of AIDS that up until very recently was a serious problem is the treatment, or mistreatment, of those who are HIV positive, but do not have AIDS. One of the most famous stories is the treatment of Ryan White. He was not allowed to attend a public school because he had AIDS. His story was told and people began to realize that those with HIV can lead "normal" lives and must be treated equally. Fortunately, conditions have improved.

It is hard to know what society might be like had it not been for AIDS. It might be fair to assume that society in general would be much more sexually promiscuous had AIDS not curbed this trend. Another effect that isn't usually noticed at first glance is the creation of jobs. AIDS has made it necessary for thousands of workers in the pharmaceuticals industry as well as research. Also, people have been hired to counsel AIDS patients and write literature about the causes and

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the methods of prevention. Even the arts have changed since AIDS came about. Songs have been written. Movies have been made, such as 'The Band Played On'.

In conclusion, the effects of AIDS on society are very far-reaching. They stretch from social behavior changes to a change in art and music. AIDS has caused all Americans to think about their lives and how fragile life is. They must be careful and use caution. Hopefully, all of society will one day know the causes of AIDS and the means of prevention. They will take knowledge and apply it. With a cure and an end to the spread of this disease, society will survive and prosper.

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