

HOW IS AIDS DIFFERENT?

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY MEDICINE

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People often ask, what's so different about AIDS? There are so many illnesses - and even many epidemics: some of which presently carry off more of humanity than HIV and AIDS do. What is so special about HIV/AIDS that this condition should attract so much public attention, political action and funding on a global scale? My answers to these questions, often asked, are these:

1. AIDS is incurable, and we have become used to miracle drugs;
2. AIDS is threatening and the health care workers have become used to a largely risk-free professional existence;
3. AIDS inhibits personal freedom in sexual expression; and we have become used to a more liberated attitude to sexuality;
4. AIDS has attacked, in Western societies, already stigmatized groups - sex workers, homosexuals and bisexuals, and drug users - so that its catchment is more confined than medical conditions generally are. These groups touch deep feelings of prejudice and resentment and thereby reduce the normal response of compassion and concern for people who are ill;
5. The palliative treatment available is labour intensive and the drugs are extremely expensive, often with very serious side-effects;
6. Infection with HIV is often/usually ultimately fatal and it strikes down mainly young people, with much to offer to themselves, their families and society;
7. Whilst there are many treatable international scourges, AIDS from its first identification has spread most rapidly to every country. It is a totally unexpected new health crisis for the world, particularly Africa;
8. It threatens to limit international movement in an age of internationalisation and Jumbo jets; and
9. It confronts health care workers with their own prejudices in a way that few other conditions do.

Ironically, in solving AIDS, we may be forced to solve other problems eg:

- (a) Drug dependance;
- (b) Stigmatization of sexuality;
- (c) International cooperation on health care issues.

HIV/AIDS will test us all - nations, communities, individuals. Are we equal to the challenge?

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