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HIV/AIDS - The Great Magnifier of Maladies - is Entirely Preventable

By Mary Ann Adler Cohen, MD

Many persons throughout the world do not believe that there is still a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) pandemic and that the epidemics of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and HIV stigma still exist. As we will see, throughout the world there is evidence of an HIV pandemic: 36.9 million persons are living with HIV despite the fact that HIV and AIDS are entirely preventable. There are 17 million children orphaned by the loss of one or both parents to AIDS, all of whom are affected by loss and some of whom are living with HIV as a result of maternal transmission. Although HIV is very easy to diagnose with rapid HIV testing, 19 million or 54% of persons with HIV are unaware that they are infected. Once diagnosed, persons who were previously unaware of the HIV infection can be referred for medical care and treatment with anti-retroviral medication that will enable persons with HIV to live relatively healthy lives. When a person with HIV is engaged and retained in care the human immunodeficiency virus can respond to medical care and treatment with anti-retroviral medication and the number of virus particles can be reduced to undetectable levels. This reduction of viral particles to undetectable levels can, in combination with other risk reduction measures, help prevent the spread of HIV to other persons. Treatment of women with HIV throughout the course of pregnancy, labor, and delivery can ensure that their children are born healthy and uninfected with HIV. Engagement and retention in care enables persons with HIV to live relatively healthy lives just as anyone else with other chronic manageable illnesses.

Each year, 2.1 million persons are newly infected with HIV and 1.1 million persons die of AIDS-related deaths. Worldwide, 59% of persons with HIV are not accessing treatment. These numbers cannot even begin to reflect the suffering and anguish experienced by persons infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. By understanding the complex factors involved with attaining a goal of a world free of HIV and AIDS we can work together to address the dilemma of the tragic spread of this manageable chronic and severe illness and to ensure that persons with HIV receive competent and compassionate care until a vaccine and a cure are

developed.

If lupus, multiple sclerosis, malaria, Lyme disease, and syphilis are “The Great Masqueraders” because many of their symptoms are similar to those of other illnesses, HIV/AIDS is “The Great Magnifier” of both illness and aspects of health care. HIV magnifies disparities, stigma, and discrimination in health care, and leads to both transmission and lack of access to care. As long as HIV is stigmatized, persons who have risk behaviors or suspect that they have HIV will fear discrimination or ostracism and may delay or avoid getting tested, being diagnosed, disclosing HIV to potential partners, or accessing care.

Negative Aspects of HIV as Magnifier

- Health care disparities
- Stigma and Discrimination
 - ❖ ageism
 - ❖ misogyny
 - ❖ racism
 - ❖ addictophobia
 - ❖ homophobia
 - ❖ mental illness stigma
 - ❖ AIDSism
- Avoidance of getting tested
- Avoidance of access to care
- Treatment refusal
- Many medical and psychiatric illnesses occur in persons with HIV
- HIV occurs with much higher frequency in persons with psychiatric illness
- Non-disclosure of HIV infection for fear of rejection or ostracism
- Criminalization of HIV, of risk behaviors, and of persons at potential risk

Ironically, as a consequence of the concerted efforts of advocacy and activism on the part of gay men with HIV and AIDS and some of their clinicians, there are positive aspects of HIV as The Great Magnifier of Maladies. □

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