

AIDS: A BITTER PILL TO SWALLOW

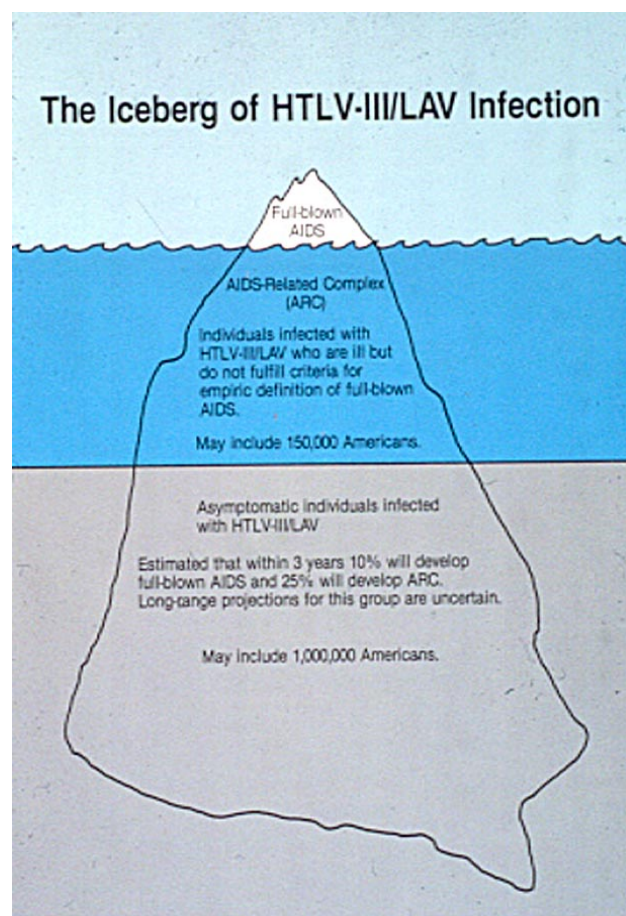
The proposed deportation of a South African from Dublin last August would not normally have hit the headlines. However, 'Mr N' asserted that his removal would be the signature on his death warrant as he suffers from HIV. He told the law courts in Dublin that the South African health service would deny him the antiretroviral drugs needed to fight the effects of the disease. Thus for the first time in nearly two decades AIDS became a media worthy issue.

South Africa has the highest number of HIV/AIDS sufferers in the world, with over 5.3 million South Africans diagnosed as HIV positive. The South African government has been reluctant to embrace the drugs and the benefits they bring, claiming that their impact was grossly overrated; instead the health minister, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang promoted the message that a healthy diet would counter the deadly effects of the disease. But finally, after global pressure, in November 2003, the Cabinet voted to distribute the drugs to those in need. The South African government could no longer ignore the issue or fail to provide the correct medication for its population. But surely this is not the case in Britain?

Many in Britain are unaware of the statistics for countries like South Africa preferring to see it as the economic beacon in the African continent. But they are also blissfully ignorant of the statistics charting how AIDS is affecting Britain, as the topic has all but disappeared from the media. There are no 'tip of the iceberg' or gravestone epitaph campaigns in the 21st century. The red ribbon of the Terence Higgins Trust has been eclipsed by a multitude of colourful bands and fashionable ribbons.

Portrayed in the 1980s and 90s as a 'gay' disease, this myth has long been dispelled, but most people are unaware that 59% of those diagnosed with HIV in 2004 were infected through heterosexual sex. Women aged 25 to 34 and men aged 30 to 39 are the groups most likely to be diagnosed in the United Kingdom. Many people regard the threat of AIDS with scepticism, concentrating instead on the more topical issue of teen pregnancy or the epidemic of STI's. In 2008 it is estimated that 75,000 will be living with HIV in the UK- the government can no longer afford to ignore the issue at home or abroad.

The government has ploughed millions of pounds into promoting 'Citizenship' not just of the UK but also of the world and is a compulsory aspect of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 3. Yet the youth of 2006 are failed by the government who do not consider AIDS education as important as the reduction of political apathy or environmental issues. The youth need to know the facts about the risk they take when they have unprotected sex as well as their responsibilities as a wealthy western nation in respect to the AIDS pandemic in Africa.



With the highest teen pregnancy rate in Europe and numbers of those infected with sexually transmitted diseases soaring, even the basic sexual health messages are not hitting home. It is therefore no surprise that the more complex problem of HIV and AIDS has led to Hillary McCammond, a school nurse for Home Trust, a local health organisation, to believe that 'most young people know AIDS is here but are still ignorant about it'. Unfortunately, there is little AIDS education in Northern Irish schools but Home First are hoping to change that with a new presentation that will be shown to pupils in the Mid-Ulster area. Ms.McCammond hopes that this will enable pupils to 'be strong enough to make choices by getting the right information'.

Similarly, Sally Wright of the Terence Higgins Trust believes that sexual health education varies dramatically in different schools and feels that a more regulated curriculum would enable young people all over Britain to make educated decisions. 'The education teenagers receive definitely shouldn't be just biological - young people need to talk about relationships and emotions' states Wright.

Teenagers receive inadequate education on how to protect their sexual health so political action is the key to decreasing the numbers of those infected with HIV. Politicians have the power to save thousands of lives; they simply need to, as Diane Kohler Barnard from the Democratic Alliance says 'once and for all...face up to the scale of the pandemic'.

"Don't die of ignorance!"

This slogan will be familiar to those around in the 1980's as were the images of the tombstone and the iceberg. The government campaign was fast and furious and seemed to be effective in combating the threatened AIDS epidemic. The startling imagery has gone but AIDS still kills nearly 500 people every year in the UK.

Little Britain is the latest ground breaking comedy parodying many aspects of life in the UK. Vicky Pollard's 'yeah, but no, but yeah' catch phrase echoes throughout the land but so does her stereotype. Britain has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe and there are 104,155 diagnoses of Chlamydia every year. We may laugh at Vicky and her pink tracksuit but this comic character and thousands of British teens like her are exposing themselves to the risk of HIV on a regular basis.

It is a worrying statistics that in a recent survey, over a third of teens interviewed believed there was a cure for AIDS. Teenagers are the group most at risk and yet are undergoing the most intensive part of their education. We have to ask ourselves 'Is AIDS Education being taught effectively in British schools?'

Our attitudes to sex need to change and education is the only way to affect this change. The media presentation of casual and unprotected sex needs to be challenged. The use of contraception needs to take account of sexually transmitted infections as well as the risk of pregnancy. Condoms need to be a necessary accessory not an embarrassing encumbrance.

Our society has changed radically since the early 80's and the initial media frenzy surrounding AIDS. Many of the myths have been shattered as has the stigma but one message still rings true - 'Don't die of ignorance'.

