

HIV/AIDS: the benefits of erasing the stigma

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Abbreviations: AIDS, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome; HIV, human immunodeficiency virus; ART, antiretroviral therapy; CDC, centers for disease control and prevention

Opinion

The world is on a fast-track mission to reach an AIDS-free generation by year 2030. To obtain this goal, every country and its stakeholders must tirelessly work to erase the stigma associated with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Historically, the stigma has prevented infected persons from sharing their status due to fear of embarrassment, isolation, and discrimination. It has also prevented people from simply wanting to know their status. To effectively end the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the associated stigma, the four pillars of HIV/AIDS (prevention, testing, treatment, and care) must be consistently exposed to the world by every means possible.

Sustained publicization of HIV/AIDS prevention measures is twofold: it will continuously decrease the stigma by exposing the public to the information necessary for them to help make the appropriate behavioral changes for preventing HIV in the first place and it has a strong tendency to encourage the public to know their status so that they can receive the most effective treatments available.

The benefits of erasing the stigma means that more testing can occur, which would reveal whether the person needs to be linked to care and treatment. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 1.1 million persons in the United States are living with HIV and almost 1 in 5 (18.1%) do not know they are infected. The longer the virus remains untreated, the more likely the viral load will continue to compromise an infected person's immune system (the body's mechanism for fighting infections). Lowering the levels of the virus with proper antiretroviral therapy (ART) helps people live longer and healthier lives.

When treatments for HIV/AIDS were first made available persons infected with the virus, it involved severe side effects and taking several pills on a daily basis. Fortunately, treatment regimens have evolved to a once-daily pill. In the event a person becomes infected

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with HIV, their lives can remain almost uninterrupted by taking a single pill and by continuing to protect themselves and others from the chance of acquiring the virus.

When a person is made aware of an HIV-positive diagnosis, they must be immediately linked to care, as it cannot be determined when the viral load first became at a detectable level. In some cases, if a person goes for a long period of time without proper treatment, they may begin to experience AIDS-related health consequences. Therefore, the importance of receiving prompt and consistent care is of great short and long-term benefits.

On November 30, 2015, the United States government President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), along with world influencers, launched a global movement to stop the HIV/AIDS epidemic by promptly linking HIV-positive persons to treatment. The movement itself is striving to reach a goal of ensuring treatment by year 2020. Therefore, erasing the stigma is definitely a leap in the right direction towards an AIDS-free world and generation.

For more information on HIV/AIDS, be sure to follow @LakishaHarris on Twitter and LinkedIn.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.