

A Disease of Society:
Cultural Responses to AIDS (Part 1)

Editors: Dorothy Nelkin, David P. Willis,
and Scott V. Parris

I. Introduction

I

DOROTHY NELKIN, DAVID P. WILLIS, and
SCOTT V. PARRIS

II. Dimensions of Cultural and
Social Change

The Social Impact of AIDS in
Sub-Saharan Africa

IO

ETIENNE VAN DE WALLE

The potential expansion of the HIV epidemic and its cultural impact in sub-Saharan Africa are vast. Projections under conservative assumptions suggest that the toll of AIDS will reach five million annual deaths by 2010, although the net African population will continue to increase significantly. Cultural practices, including large differences in age between men and women at marriage and a long period of postpartum abstinence, have contributed to the frequency of extramarital relations and eased the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. In response to the spread of AIDS, social adaptations will include profound changes in sexual behavior, marriage customs, and childbearing.

III. Social Relationships and Behaviors

AIDS and Changing Concepts of Family 33

CAROL LEVINE

The family in contemporary America may be defined as a group of individuals who by birth, adoption, marriage, or declared commitment share deep personal connections and are mutually entitled to receive, and obligated to provide, support of various kinds. As more people live in nontraditional arrangements, the gap between their needs and interests and official designations of family widens; AIDS has accelerated this change, affecting legal definitions, medical decisions, and questions of housing and child custody. While existing families adjust to the exigencies of AIDS, changing laws and customs may also affect the formation of new families. The epidemic threatens the intimacy and acceptance that ideally bind family ties, while at the same time reinforcing their necessity.

Coming of Age in the Era of AIDS: Puberty, Sexuality, and Contraception 59

JEANNE BROOKS-GUNN and
FRANK F. FURSTENBERG, JR.

The existing discrepancies between adolescent and societal constructions of teenage sexuality in America are further exacerbated by AIDS. Male and female teenagers receive different and often conflicting messages about sexuality from diverse sources; their parents' lack of frankness about sexual intercourse contrasts sharply with the media's emphasis on sex and with highly rationalistic discussions about sexuality in schools, complicating adolescents' decisions about entering and continuing sexual relationships. Survey research indicates that not all teenagers engaging in sexual intercourse reduce risks of HIV infection as much as they might. While AIDS has prompted many teenagers to change their sexual behavior, serious questions remain about adolescents' conceptions of the dangers of unprotected sex.

AIDS and the Social Relations of Intravenous Drug Users

85

SAMUEL R. FRIEDMAN, DON C. DES JARLAIS, and
CLAIRE E. STERK

Gauging the impact of AIDS on intravenous drug users requires analysis of the cultural, political, and racial contexts of American society in which drug use is embedded. Considerable variation in behavior among drug injectors and noninjectors in different cities over time further complicates an understanding of the dynamics of drug use. AIDS has prompted many IV drug users to change their behavior, though not all users have reduced the risks of transmitting HIV infection. While expanded harm-reduction strategies and drug abuse treatment systems may help limit the epidemic's spread, weak federal support, constrained hospital resources, and racial stigma inhibit more direct action needed to stem the negative social and personal consequences of drug use.

IV. Rights of Access and Protection

New Rules for New Drugs: The Challenge of AIDS to the Regulatory Process

III

HAROLD EDGAR and DAVID J. ROTHMAN

AIDS is systematically changing attitudes and practices regarding the regulation and use of drugs. The complex framework and rigorous research protocols developed by the Food and Drug Administration prior to the 1980s to minimize risk to subjects is shifting in the epidemic's wake to maximize innovation. The FDA has adopted new procedures hastening access to investigational drugs and easing drug importation for personal use, which, in effect, transfers decisions about the benefits and risks of drugs from the agency's staff to patients and their physicians. While the FDA's tilt toward embracing consumer rights may continue in the near future, disappointing results could prompt the agency to reassert its authority in controlling drug policy more restrictively.

AIDS and the Rights of the Individual: Toward a More Sophisticated Understanding of Discrimination

143

THOMAS B. STODDARD and WALTER RIEMAN

AIDS is the first public health crisis in America to arise after the mid-century civil rights revolution. Reflecting the values of the civil rights movement, public health experts have drawn attention to the dangers of discrimination against individuals who are sick or at risk, and generally have expressed a preference for voluntary over compulsory measures to limit the spread of the illness. Remarkably, government officials—judges, legislators, and administrators—have largely acceded to the views of these experts. This perspective indicates a more sophisticated understanding of discrimination issues throughout society; experience with AIDS may itself help to transform and refine ideas about individual rights, especially the constitutional conception of “equal protection under the law.”

Notes on Contributors

175