

HIV/AIDS Still Demands Attention

Editorial

By the mid-1990s, HIV/AIDS had permeated the nation's psyche.

After the previous decade of fear, paranoid confusion and misinformation, America was coming to grips with this epidemic through books ("And the Band Played On"), movies ("Philadelphia") and theater ("Rent"). The red ribbon was easily synonymous with AIDS awareness. More and more people got tested for HIV.

But 15 years later, how aware are we? Despite improved testing and an explosion of easily available, scientifically sound information about how to prevent the transmission of this once-baffling killer, America remains largely in the dark about HIV/AIDS - both how serious it is and who's at risk. Peoria is no exception, as recent stories in this newspaper showed.

That lack of awareness is evident in national HIV testing rates, which have pretty much flattened out since 2000. About one-third of American adults get screened for the virus. As a result, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control says that about a quarter of Americans infected are ignorant of their status. In Illinois, the AIDS Foundation of Chicago estimates that as many as 10,000 people are unaware they are HIV-positive.

That, in turn, makes it harder to monitor infection rates, and it's a big reason why HIV continues to spread. According to the CDC, in 2006 about 35,000 new cases of HIV/AIDS were diagnosed among adults, adolescents and children - a number dramatically down from the 1980s, certainly, but still alarming.

So how did Americans lose their sense of vigilance?

Ironically, dramatic advances in HIV/AIDS treatment - especially anti-retroviral therapy (HAART) - have caused the culture to minimize the seriousness of the virus and its effect on the immune system. HIV infection was once a rapid death sentence. Now it is possible to live for years, even decades with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and not develop acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

In 1993 we saw tennis pro Arthur Ashe's body ravaged by AIDS-related pneumonia. In 2008 we see HIV-positive basketball legend Magic Johnson living his life.

But it's dangerous to underestimate HIV. About 16,000 people in the U.S. die from AIDS-related illnesses each year.

Also, as local HIV/AIDS patients described, there seems to be a willful, persistent ignorance about who can contract the virus. While the CDC reports that homosexual men do represent a high number of new HIV infections, that could be because the gay community is much more dutiful about getting tested. The virus itself doesn't discriminate, affecting people of all ethnicities, ages and sexual orientations. In fact, heterosexual women represent an emerging at-risk population because the CDC says

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they may be unaware of their male partners' sex history. AIDS is spreading quickly among African-Americans and Latinos, too.

Interestingly, the CDC suggests that doctors themselves perpetuate the stigmas around AIDS. By treating screenings as "exceptional" rather than routine, that feeds the public's perception that AIDS is something "other people" get.

This month marks 25 years since the AIDS-causing virus was isolated. There's still plenty of fear, confusion and misinformation out there. The new generation coming of age doesn't recognize that red ribbon. Older generations may be growing complacent.

To be sure, thousands of HIV-positive Americans are living out their lives, but that doesn't mean we can consider the epidemic of the 1980s and '90s over. Americans should be aware, and, as always, educate themselves.

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