

We have won the battle against HIV but not the stigma

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Date : 16th November 2016

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We have won the battle against HIV "virus" but not the stigma

As I see it by Dr Brighton Chireka

"He/she is HIV positive and is spreading it " are the headlines in some online news sites or social media pages. Some people take it upon themselves to "inform the public" about the HIV status of somebody . Firstly the issue of disclosure should be a personal choice and it's sad that the choice is taken away by ruthless people hiding behind fake names on social media. The sad thing is that some of the people are wrongly labelled as HIV positive . It's more worrying when self claimed street doctors start to diagnose people as HIV positive by hearsay or by the way they look. This seems sadly driven by the fact that HIV still produces enough of a scandal to sell newspapers. Aids stories generates more hits to bloggers' websites or social media pages.

And when shame is involved, it is inevitably accompanied by a healthy dose of blame. The people who perpetrate it have no personal connection to the disease. When you have a personal connection with HIV or any disease you will then realise how painful some of the things that we allow on social media . It's well and good when it is others but we know that life is full of surprises and we know that those who dish the most shame are not good at taking it . When we ask them to taste or drink their own medicine they cry loudly telling us that it is poisonous. We then wonder why give it to others if it is poisonous?

According to the Center for Disease Control, 44 percent of people who are HIV positive are unaware of their status. Unfortunately, the people who may be perpetuating the shame game may soon find that it is they who need help. Even if they may claim to be negative themselves , it does not give them the permission to invade people's privacy and we know that all is not well in their lives. We do not want to diagnose them online or in public but we humbly advise them to seek medical help whilst it is not too late. This involves the people who supply wrong information to these sites and also those sites that publish these rumours without verification and also without respecting the privacy of the people involved.

I respected and salute people who test positive for HIV , take their diagnosis positively and commence treatment. These people are taking responsibility not only for their health but the health of others. We should be encouraging people to come up in the open about their HIV status but we should never ever take away their right to remain secretive about their health. We all have our medical problems and we want them to remain private so the same applies to others as well.

Why should the naming be wrong

If you say that so and so is Diabetic , that person will received sympathy but not the person who is HIV positive . The problem is that as a society we are also to blame . We have allowed the rejection , prejudice and discrimination of people living with HIV. People living with HIV have nothing to be ashamed of . Our society should be ashamed of itself for lagging in the stereotypes and myths of several decades ago . Due to lack of knowledge about HIV a lot of myths came about which should be buried in this day and age as we are now fully informed.

The truth about HIV

With the advance in research we now know that early diagnosis and proper treatment of HIV results in good outcomes . Living with HIV is no longer a life-limiting condition. Life expectancy of an HIV positive person is now the same as for one who is negative. The good thing is that people on treatment have a suppressed viral load, making HIV undetectable in their bodies and they are the least likely to pass it on to others . The dangerous people are the so called " negative " ones who are spreading the news that people who get HIV are second class citizens.

Raising awareness

When prominent people in our communities talk about their health ,it raises awareness and end the stigma to some of the diseases that we face. In the UK when Jade Goody announced voluntarily that she had cervical cancer, the number of women taking smear tests increased by 400 000. If we force people to reveal their health status then we run the risk of scaring people from getting diagnosed. Stigmatising a treatable disease isn't going to make people put a condom on, more that it'll make people keep it a secret.

Naming and shaming people about their health condition is not the same as raising awareness . Actually naming and shaming is counterproductive as it results in stereotypes and stigma towards people with certain conditions. A lot of diseases are partly caused by our lifestyles and these diseases include , diabetes , heart disorders , high blood pressure , cancer to just mention a few . We do not blame or name and shame these people why ? People who are living with HIV have acquired it through different ways and to think that they are all promiscuous is following the stereotype by the ignorant people . I am afraid we still have people who "show off " their ignorance on social media and sadly they have followers.

I was taught that a rumour needs an ear and if you want to stop rumours just block your ears or stop providing ears. The same applies to those that spread hate and try to character assassinate others, we should deny them the audience. We facilitated their behaviour by visiting their websites

or social media pages. Even this article will "benefit" these people as more people will want to find more about these people . My message is that we should stand on the side of the person with a medical condition that has been made public without their permission. Also we must understand that the majority of these people do not have the so called diseases because no one will have done any tests on them. It's a game of hate . I hate so and so , "so I will make him or her" HIV positive and I am going to tell everyone. We must also remember that no amount of writing or gossiping will make an HIV negative person become positive.

We must not continue to shame those living with HIV because of our outdated stereotypes and self-righteous, unfounded opinions. This is fear-mongering and it is wrong. Shaming or punishing someone living with HIV leads to neither prevention nor treatment. Asking someone how they contracted HIV is not going to advance how we help people living with HIV/AIDS. Naming and shaming can also tar the innocent. We know of people that have been wrongly accused of being positive and have had their lives ruined by reckless reporting .

The way I feel when I am said (against my wish) to have diabetes or high blood pressure and the way you the public feel should be the same when you hear that I am HIV positive. At the moment it is not the case because the moment we hear about someone's fake HIV status we run into conclusions. We see headlines claiming that the person is spreading the disease and that they got the disease by being promiscuous.

We know that one can get HIV through birth, needle stick injury , blood transfusion if the blood is not screened properly and also through sexual intercourse. We also know that even one sexual encounter can result in someone getting HIV so this talk about promiscuity does not make sense. You do not need to have sexual contact with a certain number of people in order to get HIV . Just one encounter can result in you getting the virus and has nothing to do with your sexual behaviour.

Let me end by saying this quotation; "no one deserves HIV—not the people that are being paraded as positive, not drug users, not sex workers, not people who engage in condomless sex, not people who have sex with one person, and not people who have sex with 100 people every night for the rest of their lives." We grow one step closer to solving this pandemic when we use compassion, conversations not rooted in reductive stereotypes, accurate scientific research, and nuance. We all have a role to play in eradicating the stigma and shame that surrounds this virus.

No one should be ashamed of suffering from any disease !

Read more about HIV/AIDS and be fully informed

<http://docbeecee.co.uk/aids-is-no-longer-a-death-sentence-getting-to-zero-transmission-is-our-aim/>

This article was compiled by Dr Brighton Chireka , who is a GP and a blogger based in Kent in the United Kingdom. Feel free to contact him at info@docbeecee.co.uk and you can read more of his work on his blog at [DR CHIREKA'S BLOG](#)

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