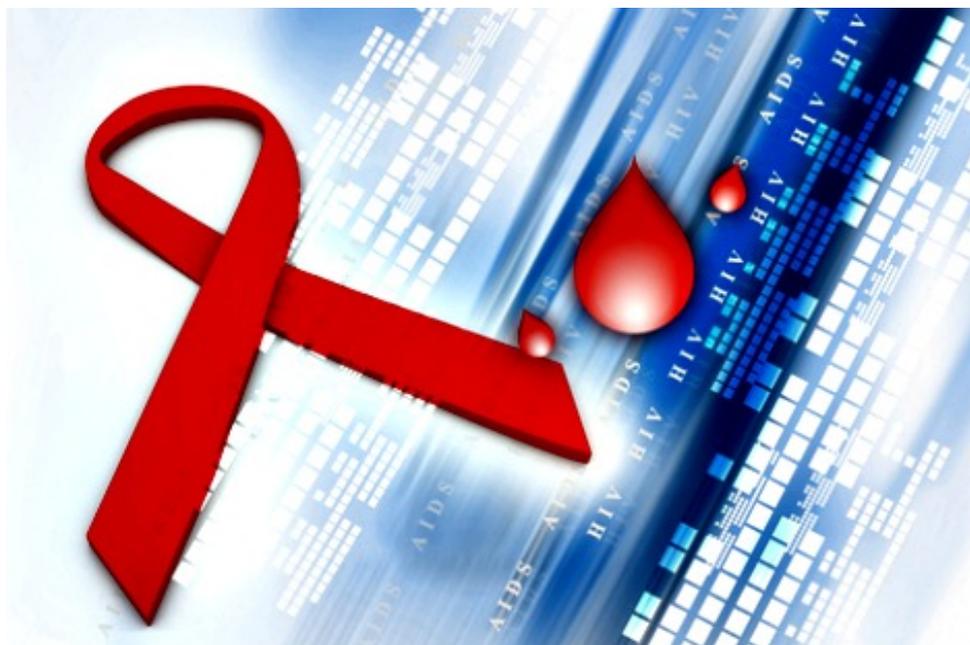


The enemy is AIDS, not those who live with it

6 Comments

Michael Mullins | 27 July 2014

While some



(<http://www.fava.org.au/news/2014/ending-aids-we-need-to-stop-transmissions/>) groups still believe that people infected with HIV should be stigmatised as a deterrent, the majority view at this month's International AIDS Conference in Melbourne is that victims and the social groups to which they belong must be empowered.

The media is being encouraged to listen to stories such as Sarah's (<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2014/s4052755.htm>):

As a young woman, I was 21 when I was diagnosed, and it's that, it takes away your whole impression of what your life will be like. ... And social stigma as well. It's really hard, like to be a young woman diagnosed, there's no education about it, you don't know how people are going to react to you. It's really scary, it's really scary.

Religious groups, school teachers, and the media can all choose to be part of the problem, or part of the solution, a source of fear or hope.

A few weeks before the conference, a health services practitioner in an eastern Victorian town reported that he or she was HIV positive. One media outlet played the fear card when it quoted (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2692595/Victorian-health-department-issues-HIV-warning-400-patients.html>) a patient: '[I felt] pretty sick actually, very sick in the stomach'.

Meanwhile the health worker had had the psychological strength to report his or her HIV positive status to authorities. This enabled them to take proper precautions, and it was therefore unlikely that any patients would contract the virus. If he or she had been overcome by fear or shame, it is doubtful the alarm would have been raised, and the population would have been placed at greater risk.

Some continue to worry (<http://www.fava.org.au/news/2014/ending-aids-we-need-to-stop-transmissions/>) that infection rates are rising despite numerous campaigns, and feel that we therefore need stronger deterrence. In other words, greater stigma placed on those living with HIV. The more positive way of thinking is to empower people in this situation to share their stories and experiences.

Associate Professor Trevor Cullen of Edith Cowan University is an expert in health journalism and reporting infectious diseases, especially AIDS. He is currently spearheading a pilot program promoting positive media education. He's delivered media training to Conference delegates at the Melbourne AIDS Conference, and says (<http://www.ecu.edu.au/news/latest-news/2014/05/putting-hiv-back-in-the-spotlight>): 'Research has shown that if effectively used, the media can lessen fear and stigma which are the biggest obstacles to seeking information and treatment.'

Former justice Michael Kirby is arguing that law reform is also essential in the fight against marginalising groups that are vulnerable to the AIDS infection. These include men who have sex with men, sex workers, injecting drug users, prisoners and refugees.

He says (<https://theconversation.com/the-law-can-be-an-awful-nuisance-in-the-area-of-hiv-aids-michael-kirby-29543>): 'The law can be a guardian of people who are vulnerable and who are sick but the law ... can be a burden on the person and their freedom, on their ability to see the importance of getting the HIV test, and getting onto antiretroviral drugs if they turn out to be positive.'

To this end, Victorian health minister David Davis has announced (<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jul/20/hiv-specific-law-criminalising-deliberate-transmission-to-be-amended>) a move to amend the law criminalising intentional HIV transmission. Kirby praises the reform, adding that it is important that the message 'should go to Africa, to Russia and other countries where [discriminatory] laws exist – and we should not be polite in the delivering of that message'.

Where the law and the media are prepared do stand with those living with the HIV – and not against them – there is hope that all concerned will take the necessary rational steps to contain the virus.



Michael Mullins is editor of Eureka Street.

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