

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXXIII, Number 128, 7 December 2009 — The battle against HIV/AIDS [ARTICLE]

The battle against HIV/AIDS

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Throughout the past week, the Columbia community came together to discuss and bring awareness to the issue of HIV/AIDS. Starting Dec. 1, people throughout the world took a moment to reflect on the fight against the pandemic, to celebrate our accomplishments and examine our mistakes, to bring awareness to our communities and recognize our current boundaries, and, most importantly, to commemorate the millions of lives that have been lost to this disease.

But the battle against HIV/AIDS does not rage for just one day a year, nor for the one week that Columbia devotes to it. The battle against HIV/AIDS takes place every minute of every day for every person affected by it.

From the moment people are first infected with HIV, their lives are changed completely. The disease will alter their futures, whether they learn of their infection in the coming days, months, years, or never.

From my brief, informal survey of Columbia students, it seems to me that many of us feel very disconnected from the pandemic. While we are educated about the transmission and prevention of the disease, most of us don't have personal experience with it. Many students feel that the original challenges facing HIV patients in America have been largely reduced with the improvement of medical knowledge and the reduction of stigma and discrimination. However, these students also concede that they don't understand the everyday challenges faced by a person living with HIV/AIDS in our country, nor do they know how they would react to an HIV-positive person in their life. What is it like to live with HIV/AIDS in our society today?

First, medical advancements in the past

13 years have significantly improved the lives of HIV-positive people who have access to care. In North America, this has meant a change from the translation of the diagnosis as a death sentence, to simply an illness with which one lives.

However, living with the disease, even with the various support systems and advanced medical aid available in North America, is no simple matter. To begin with, there is the challenge of finding a suitable cocktail of medications, and being consistent in the medication regime. When talking with HIV-positive friends, I was taken aback to hear of the small concerns they experience every day due to the fear of accidentally transmitting the disease. A simple paper cut may incite incredible panic.

In addition to the constant medical concerns, people living with HIV/AIDS are faced with ongoing social challenges due to continued fears of stigma and discrimination in society. Many HIV-positive persons in our society choose not to disclose their status for fear of negative consequences in their place of work and the disintegration of friendships and family relations. A person then faces challenges with practical matters such as health insurance, life insurance, and ability to travel.

In discussions with HIV-positive friends, it quickly became clear to me that relationships are the aspect of life most directly affected by their positive status. One is consistently faced with challenging questions that are seemingly irreconcilable. The fear of rejection due to their HIV-positive status may consistently discourage dating and finding a partner. At what point does a person tell a possible partner that they are HIV positive? Does engaging in safe sex eliminate the responsibility to disclose their status to their partner? To what extent is it also the responsibility of one's partner to inquire about possible sexually transmitted infections? These questions and concerns dominate all considerations of romantic and sexual relations.

While HIV/AIDS constitutes a terrifying physical illness, it is not simply the

physiological effects that change the lives of those it infects, but also the social issues and implications of an HIV-positive status. Stigma due to perceptions of lifestyle choices associated with the disease has worsened an already daunting fate. It is this fate of prejudice and discrimination which captures the essence of the fight against HIV/AIDS. This is not only a fight for public health. This is a fight for social justice.

A little over a week ago, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS released its most recent data on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The update shows that HIV infections have decreased by 17 percent worldwide over the past eight years. While this news is reason to be hopeful in the face of this disease, it must not be taken as a reason to slow our efforts of prevention. Instead, it must be recognized as a sign to continue the momentum with which prevention programs have been progressing worldwide.

On this day, Dec. 7, 2009, around 5,500 people will die of AIDS throughout the world, with an estimated 7,400 new infections appearing. The same thing occurred yesterday and will occur tomorrow. On each of these days, a doctor in Lilongwe will treat people suffering from tuberculosis due to AIDS, a counselor in Bombay will run safe sex workshops, and a harm reduction worker in New York City will distribute clean needles to injection drug users. These activities, challenges, and concerns are part of everyday life for everyone infected or affected by HIV/AIDS.

Even beyond the span of seven days, that is World Aids Week, let us reflect, let us understand, let us remember, and let us regain momentum for the continued fight ahead. It's a long road, but we do have every reason to be hopeful.

The author is a Columbia College sophomore. "The battle against HIV/AIDS" is the first in a two-part series by the author on World Aids Week. The second installment will appear exclusively online tomorrow.