

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXXIV, Number 123, 29 November 2010 — HIV/AIDS : A call to action [ARTICLE]

## HIV/AIDS : A call to action

BY AMIRAH SEQUEIRA

The world has been fighting the AIDS epidemic since 1981. Columbia's campus has been actively involved in this fight for over 25 years, and the coming decade should be no exception to this tradition.

Over 25 million lives have been claimed by HIV/AIDS since 1981. The numbers are astounding, but they do little to capture the wide-reaching effects of a disease whose immense social implications have ensured unparalleled challenges in its prevention and treatment.

These social implications can be traced to the discovery of HIV, when the Centers for Disease Control reported cases of rare pneumonia, unusual skin cancer, and Kaposi's sarcoma in young gay men in 1981. The discovery marked the beginning of one of the most controversial public health crises in human history. Everything from the origin and transmission of the virus to the best mechanisms for its prevention and treatment has been hotly contested. Associations of the disease with the gay male community, the intravenous drug user community, and minority populations furthered stigma and prejudice and created hostile environments for those affected.

Here in New York, and particularly on Columbia's campus, a social movement took place that brought AIDS into the spotlight. Activists fought against stigma and discrimination, for research into treatment, and for governmental involvement in widespread prevention programs. They demanded equal employment opportunities, adequate housing, and sufficient medical care for patients.

At Columbia today, problems regarding HIV and AIDS no longer seem as pressing due largely to the work of these activists. Discrimination toward patients is no longer as apparent. Students fully understand prevention techniques from high school health class and have steady access to them on campus. Testing and counseling are readily available (for free!) through fantastic services such as the Gay Health Advocacy Project. Within the Columbia gates, it may seem that there isn't much more fighting left to do.

But HIV and AIDS have not gone away—there are 33 million people living with it today. While medical advancements and the proliferation of preventative programming have reduced rates of infection, new policies and funding cuts threaten to reverse our progress.

HIV is no longer a death sentence. Treatment that will save lives is available, but it has yet to be distributed to over 65 percent of the people who need it. Due to current cutbacks in AIDS funding, people throughout the world who had previously been guaranteed medication have been placed on waiting lists. Patients are waiting for others to die in order to receive treatment.

This is evidenced in countries such as Uganda, Nigeria,



and Zambia, but it is also happening right here at home. In the past year, waiting lists for HIV treatment have prevented American patients from accessing care. The economic downturn has increased the number of individuals applying to the AIDS Drug Assistance Program, and emergency funding has not been provided to relieve the stress on the program. There are now waitlists in at least 10 states, and more than 1,000 people are being denied access to lifesaving medications.

Just as Columbia students once fought to have treatment, respect, and equality brought to HIV and AIDS patients on campus and in New York City, students must now work to have the same services provided to those in other states and other countries.

Wednesday, Dec. 1 is World AIDS Day. As we enter the fourth decade of this battle, Columbia students must continue to fight for universal access to treatment, for the human rights of all HIV and AIDS patients, and for the end of stigma and prejudice. Whether advocating for harm reduction, the need for affordable medication, or the removal of waitlists in Ohio, North Carolina, and eight other states, Columbia students have a significant role to play. Most importantly, students must fight for all those who have lost their lives to this disease in order to honor their sacrifices and struggles. World AIDS Day is about remembrance and renewal, and Columbia's students have a responsibility to continue both.

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