

AN EPIDEMIC OF STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION



AIDS is a global pandemic. People living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) are, to varying degrees, stigmatised throughout the world. However, stigma and discrimination not only affects people living with HIV and AIDS.

Stigma and discrimination also affects people who are perceived to be HIV positive because they are members of the communities most affected by the virus, such as gay men or Africans.

People associated with someone living with the virus can also feel stigma and discrimination. This can include the children of HIV positive parents, the siblings of HIV positive people, the partners of HIV positive people, care-givers, and volunteers working in HIV organisations.

HIV-related stigma around the world is expressed through social ostracism, personal rejection, direct and indirect discrimination and laws that deprive PLWHA of their basic rights. In the United Kingdom, HIV-related discrimination in employment, health care, insurance and education has been widely reported since the beginning of the epidemic.

DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

WHAT IS HIV-RELATED STIGMA?

Stigma is a "powerful social label that radically changes the way people are viewed and view themselves".

When a stigmatising social label is applied it's usually because society considers something undesirable, shameful or unworthy.

Stigma reinforces pre-existing negative assumptions, beliefs and prejudices.

This is certainly true for HIV, which has reinforced deeply held prejudices against groups already marginalised and stigmatised, including gay men and ethnic minorities. It has also heightened the taboos associated with sexual practices and drug use.

WHAT CAUSES PEOPLE TO THINK THIS WAY ABOUT HIV AND AIDS?

A number of factors contribute to the stigmatisation of PLWHA:

- (1) AIDS is a life-threatening disease;
- (2) AIDS is associated with a degradation of the body including lesions associated with Kaposi Sarcoma and wasting;
- (3) HIV is infectious, and there remains a lack of understanding about how it is transmitted;
- (4) HIV is associated with homosexuality and injecting drug use, which are sometimes considered deviant, and as a result PLWHA are thought to be to blame for having contracted HIV;
- (5) HIV is perceived by the religious and moral beliefs of others to be punishment for a moral fault, such as promiscuous or "deviant" sex; and
- (6) HIV is associated with minorities already stigmatised and discriminated against (especially Africans). HIV related stigma builds upon and reinforces existing social stereotypes and inequalities.

It is important to remember that whilst these characteristics contribute to HIV stigma, stigma is inherently illogical and cannot be adequately explained by these factors.

When stigmatisation turns into action, it becomes discrimination.

WHAT IS HIV-RELATED DISCRIMINATION?

Discrimination can be defined as 'any action or measure that results in someone being treated less favourably because they have, or are believed to have, HIV'.

HIV-related discrimination extends to people associated with PLWHA, whether personally, or through family or professional association (e.g. people working in an HIV organisation). The essence of HIV related discrimination is that it interacts with pre-existing sources of stigma and discrimination against marginalized groups who are discriminated against either on the basis of their known HIV status or on grounds of their assumed HIV status (i.e. double discrimination).

Therefore, one cannot talk about discrimination on the basis of HIV without talking about other forms of discrimination, such as discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, as well as discrimination against injecting drug users, sex workers and prisoners; in other words, against the already marginalised or vulnerable groups in society and those most at risk of HIV.

ARE YOU HIV PREJUDICED?

For more information visit the campaign website at www.aryouhivprejudiced.org

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