



Time to press our HIV/AIDS success

By Susan A. Allen

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In 1986, I stood in the outdoor waiting area at the Centre Hospitalier in Kigali, Rwanda, and watched as the first in a long line of women stepped forward for HIV/AIDS testing. They had seen firsthand the ravages of HIV/AIDS in their communities, and there was a palpable sense of anxiety in the air as the women waited to have their blood drawn. World AIDS Day didn't exist.

No one was wearing the red ribbons we recognize today as symbols of AIDS awareness. Fear and lack of knowledge dominated the whispered conversations among the women waiting for tests.

Two years later, the World Health Organization designated Dec. 1 as the first World AIDS Day. In these early days, our Rwandan patients weren't the only ones experiencing fear and lack of knowledge. HIV-positive people were barred from entering the United States, and Princess Diana made headlines around the world when she boldly shook hands with an AIDS patient.

Today, the fight against HIV/AIDS is back in the news. In the last two weeks alone, Pope Benedict XVI suggested that condoms could be used as part of the fight against HIV/AIDS, and research reported that the antiretroviral drug Truvada was valuable in protecting healthy gay men from HIV infection.

Thanks to education and publicity, the red ribbon associated with AIDS awareness has become one of the best-known symbols of health advocacy. In Rwanda, our program of couples' voluntary HIV/AIDS counseling and testing has been established as a national policy. World AIDS Day is recognized worldwide as an occasion to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS, honor the progress we've made in prevention and treatment and acknowledge that our fight against HIV/AIDS is far from over.

In fact, World AIDS Day 2010 finds us at a pivotal point. Proposed congressional budget cuts stand to profoundly cripple global research and prevention efforts. This funding crisis could not come at a worse time. While we've made important advancements in treatment through the President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief, the WHO estimates that five new people are infected by HIV for every two who receive antiretroviral therapy (ART). The important victories we've had over the past 25 years in the fight against HIV/AIDS — developments in vaccine research, for example — are at risk of being squandered. Without critical funding, we will indeed be snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

World AIDS Day 2010 gives us an opportunity to renew the sense of urgency we felt 25 years ago — when shaking the hand of an AIDS patient was viewed as an act of courage. It is also an opportunity for us to redouble our commitment to HIV/AIDS prevention. By implementing proven, evidence-based prevention strategies such as couples' HIV/AIDS testing, we'll reduce the number of infections and, consequently, reduce the number of people who will require more costly treatment.

The brave wives and mothers who visited our Kigali testing site in the early 1980s were trailblazers. They brought their spouses to our clinic for testing long before the medical community recognized that partners in long-term relationships often do not share the same HIV status.

Today, more than 85 percent of expectant couples in Rwanda receive HIV/AIDS counseling and testing together as a routine part of prenatal care.

Whatever their outcomes, these couples are given the support and information they need to address the impact of HIV/AIDS in their lives. Those partners who don't share the same status are taught the best ways to protect the HIV-negative partner from infection. Those partners who share the same HIV status are counseled about the importance of protecting themselves and their families.

Prevention must work hand in hand with research and treatment to achieve success in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The U.S. government spends \$2.2 billion annually — 10 percent of the entire U.S. bilateral foreign aid budget and twice what we spend on prevention — to provide antiretroviral therapy to 3 million Africans. Yet approximately 25 million Africans are HIV-positive.

At the same time, 225 million African adults are HIV-negative and married — at risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS within their marriages. As we continue to work toward a vaccine and a cure, measurable prevention efforts, such as couples' testing, are our best hope for reducing transmission.

Today, people around the world will wear red ribbons, remembering loved ones and demonstrating hope and faith in the research and medical communities. I'll be wearing a red ribbon in honor of the pioneering women of Kigali who, almost 25 years ago, courageously brought their husbands to our clinic for testing.

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