
Join Hands and Kill AIDS**Amrin Kharawala**

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“Stay away from that boy”, advised her mother while bidding goodbye to her only daughter on the first day of school. A small sentence that carried the baggage of destroying a human life. The boy, a mere child of eight years, was a decent lad, just as sane, just as innocent as any other soul. Yet when he stepped into the outer world, everyone knew better than to be friends with him- reason being he was HIV positive. What was the boy's fault? That he was born in a family that was unaware of the transmission of HIV from parents to children? That his father had met with an accident and was transfused blood having HIV virus in the window period, when they could not be detected? That his parents unaware of this had unprotected intercourse rather than opt for other means of fertilization?

“AIDS doesn't kill a person, society does.” There are plenty of such cases, all arising due to the backward mindset of this supposedly small caring family of ours – 'society'! A person down with malaria or a heart attack or even an infectious and contagious disease like chickenpox are treated with love and respect, nurtured with overflowing attention to help them combat their illness, but the moment a person is tagged as PLHA, his death sentence is fixed, at the hands of this society. My question is, does AIDS spread by touching a person? Or sharing food with them? Or working with them? Or being a decent human being and treating them with the respect they deserve? Everyone, educated or not, would know the answer to these questions- It is a big NO. Despite knowing this, we still shun people with AIDS cause we follow the herd and don't think for ourselves.

“Live life, before we leave life” is the motto of any human on this planet. Sadly, people living with HIV-AIDS aren't even given a fair chance at life. Be it a

woman in the US, who was looked down upon and called a prostitute for being HIV positive to a man in Kerala, the most educated state in India, who was thrown out from his teaching job for being a HIV carrier. Till date, women in rural India are blamed for transmitting HIV to their kids by those in laws who deny her the antenatal visits at a hospital that could have prevented the cycle and counseled accordingly. The probability of the child from harboring HIV would have fallen directly to a mere 1% from 30% if the expecting mother had been given what she truly deserved. As of September 2015, 11 countries still have laws that restrict the entry, stay and residence of people living with HIV.^[1]

Slowly and steadily, as the light of development engulfs this 21st century, and awareness carves its path, people have started seeing the scenario with open minds. With the combined perseverance of the World Health Organization and the governments of different countries, a ray of hope for a better future is shining upon us. People who were earlier cast into depression, after being out casted by the society, now have the government to go to. From free medicines to one on one counseling overflowing with understanding, compassion and knowledge, people are learning to fight this illness, which they earlier succumbed to. Today, a man living with HIV in China stood up for himself and filed a lawsuit in 2012 after he was denied a job as a primary school teacher when the employer found out he was HIV-positive. In January 2013, he won the case and received compensation.^[2] Various Non-Government Organizations have been founded who hold their hands and walk with them every step of the way. Programs like National AIDS Control Program, started by the Government of India in 1992, have established blood banks, STD (Sexually Transmitted

Disease) clinics, and flagged off its largest national campaign to date, in the form of a seven-coach train the Red Ribbon Express (RRE) that travelled across 24 states reaching around 6.2 million people with HIV/AIDS education and awareness.^[3] Yet a lot still has to be done and the government alone can't accomplish this cumbersome task without community participation.

It is aptly said that "Prevention is better than cure". We cannot just sit idle and wait to fight AIDS when we are down with it. It is an active effort on our part to cease the high risk behavior- use condoms while having intercourse, to not reuse a used syringe, make use of better blood screening methods like detecting of p24 antigen of the HIV virus instead of waiting for the antibodies to be captured via ELISA, and above all, spread this knowledge to as many people as we can. Another dimension to this is of post exposure prophylaxis, which aims at preventing the replication of HIV virus if the person exposed to it takes anti-retroviral treatment within 72 hours.^[4] However the bottom line is still awareness without which none of this is possible, because HIV-AIDS doesn't discriminate between people, it attacks those who are not cautious enough.

Today, more funds are being allotted to the research for a cure for AIDS as a result of which promising advances have taken place. We have also witnessed a miraculous cure of AIDS in a person known to us as the infamous 'Berlin patient' who was diagnosed with HIV in 1995. He had been taking Anti Retroviral Therapy (ART) for 11 years to control his infection before learning that he had developed leukemia. He was given chemotherapy but it failed, so physicians decided to proceed with a bone marrow transplant. The treatment successfully cured his cancer, but interestingly the virus dropped to undetectable levels in his blood and never bounced back, despite ditching ART. Scientists believe that he was given a transplant from an individual with rare a mutation that altered one of the receptors HIV uses to get inside white blood cells. Also his own immune system was destroyed by chemotherapy and

radiation to prepare him for the transplant. This process could have killed all the HIV infected cells in his body. Finally, the transplanted cells could have attacked Brown's own cells, which is known as graft versus host disease, and hence destroyed any remaining HIV reservoirs.^[5] This case gave birth to a whole new research project, adding another direction for obtaining cure, another ray of hope for the future.

Our researchers are leaving no stone unturned in trying to uproot this disease from its roots. Another bold venture has led the scientists to develop vaccines for preventing this disease-Cytotoxic t-lymphocyte inducing vaccine, recombinant adeno associated virus vaccine, AIDSVAX.^[6] It has not emerged victorious but it is a live proof that nothing is impossible if we put our mind to it. All we have to do is to try and try till we succeed because god helps those who help themselves and good things don't come easy.

A hundred years ago, going around the world was a just a theory, a never to come true dream until the Wright brothers came up with the airplane. Moon was the only source of light in the blanket of night's darkness, until Thomas Alva Edison invented the bulb. The virtual world of internet was a mere thought which turned into reality in the blink of an eye. The menace of small pox, a horror story until Edward Jenner came up with its vaccine and then hundred years later, the disease was eradicated from the face of the earth by sheer perseverance. When the world was rejoicing the death of smallpox in 1980, a deadly disease was born, wiping the smiles from people's faces. 1981- the first case of AIDS came up in USA, slowly spreading its vast roots in the vulnerable population of the planet. It only grew stronger by the day, feeding off of people's happiness and engulfing the sky in its dark cloud. In no time, it reached its peak in 1996 that engulfed the lives of 2.5 million people in 1997.^[7] This created mayhem amongst the innocent sufferers and called for international level precautions to curtail this menace. Since then, there has been a gradual improvement and progress

towards a better future. At the advent of small pox, a highly contagious and deadly disease, people feared their doom, but through sheer determination, it was overcome. Similarly polio, a crippling communicable disease created its share of fear among people before succumbing to an inevitable death by the hands of the oral and injectable polio vaccines, in the near future. This gives us a ray of hope that someday HIV-AIDS will meet the same fate, provided we join our hands and work in union because United we stand, divided we fall!

“Don't harm yourself with, but arm yourself against AIDS.”

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