AIDS and Ebola

History repeats itself in this tale of two global epidemics.

December 29, 2014 By Trent Straube

In 1987, ACT UP created a "Quarantine Camp during New York CIty's Pride March

When news got out that a man in Texas and a doctor in New York had tested positive for Ebola virus, much of the U.S. media and political leadership reacted in typical fashion: with hysteria and fear. Despite the scientific evidence showing that asymptomatic people don't spread Ebola, several states initiated quarantines of travelers and health care workers who had been in West Africa—even those who hadn't come into contact with Ebola patients.

Sound familiar? It did for many in the HIV community. Gregg Gonsalves, co-director of the Yale Global Health Justice Partnership, and activist Peter Staley penned an article in The New England Journal of Medicine with a title that speaks volumes: "Panic, Paranoia, and Public Health—The AIDS Epidemic's Lessons for Ebola."

In 2014, ACT UP protested Ebola quarantines

Politicians in the 1980s routinely called for AIDS quarantines, and children living with HIV such as Ryan White were kicked out of schools. But the lessons applicable to today's Ebola situation go beyond fear-mongering. People who survived with HIV, write Gonsalves and Staley, "owe a deep debt of gratitude to health care workers.... The least we can do now is to stand in solidarity with them as some politicians and journalists target them for opprobrium and discrimination and try to lock them up on baseless grounds."

What's more, they write, "we all have to become activists if we are to protect the public health from being used as a tool to serve primarily political purposes."

Meanwhile, in a U.S. Senate committee meeting about Ebola, testimonies were submitted by the HIV Medicine Association, the Center for Global Health Policy, the Infectious Diseases Society of America and the Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society. Members of these groups said they supported boosting funds to fight Ebola—but not at the expense of other diseases such as HIV.

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