The Best, Worst & Weirdest 1998

POZ dares to look at history in the making

January 1, 1999 By Staff

AIDS There, we said it. *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* had quite an 18th birthday. In fact, 1998 was so unreal that we wondered if someone had slipped a little Sustiva into our Ensure. Many of our positive friends were making like up-and-at-'em Lazaruses, while some neggies were getting infected with a "What else is new?" shrug. And as the nation commiserated over a stain, our interns worked overtime to track the strange, new meanings of familiar, old words: We had *cocktails,* of course, and *compliance* was PC'd into adherence. *Drug holidays* used to mean taking -- not tossing -- all the drugs in the medicine cabinet. *Paunches* once came from pies, not pills. *Attempted murder* -- that was 1998's term for serodiscordant sex. And while black leaders alarmed about their epidemic tried to get the Prez to pronounce *a public emergency,* everybody from Sex Panic! activists to Coburnians in Congress were sticking the post prefix to it. Yes, 1998 was a crazy dream. But we're over *AIDS is over.* Take a risk: Just put your lips around the four-letter word. It's still here, dammit.

Out with a bang!

Off the LA freeway, under circling news choppers broadcasting live, in front of a banner reading "Live Free, Love Safe or Die," PWA Daniel Jones blew his head off. Why? To avenge an HMO mix-up of his records and because he feared an ugly AIDS death. "He wanted his death to mean something," his sister said. We read it as flipping the bird to the post-AIDS chorus.

Slap a label on us

For PWAs who contemplate suicide when the protease "miracle" isn't enough, medical experts coined the term *Lazarus Syndrome.* It's official: People snatched from death by combo therapy aren't crazy to find themselves less than thankful -- they feel bad, sad and -- imagine! -- mad about all that AIDS has robbed them of. With psyches likened by some docs to those of Nazi concentration-camp survivors, shouldn't they demand government reparations?

But not that label

Once only stuck to gay or black men, *AIDS Monster* proved an equal-opportunity label when used to describe a female HIVer. Out of self-confessed bitterness toward the ex who infected her, Pamela Wiser, 29, went on an unsafe-sex binge in Tennessee, allegedly bedding 50 men. She was indicted in two counties on 12 counts of willfully exposing others to HIV.

Three's company

After learning of Jerrime Day's liaison with a 16-year-old who later said she didn't know he had HIV, a Florida judge mandated that Day's future partners must sign on the dotted line, in front of a witness, before they have sex -- with or without a condom.

The year Donna Summer last had a hit
AIDS deaths were cut in half nationwide, and Castro Street ran wet with tears of joy last August after a headline in San Francisco's *Bay Area Reporter* trumpeted its first issue without an AIDS obit after some 880 with. That's 1982.

***Time* ain't on our side**
In March, *Time* magazine's megaglitzy 200-page roundup edition of the past 75 years mentioned the AIDS epidemic only in passing. An '80s event that made the cut? Superman turned 50.

They read *Newsweek*
More than half of the 18- to 24-year-olds surveyed by *The Wall Street Journal/NBC News* named AIDS as the defining event of their generation, overshadowing the end of the Cold War and the Reagan era.

Anti-Lazarus Syndrome
Canadian doc Maurice Genereux -- "a Pez dispenser for drugs," said a former patient -- was convicted on two counts of assisted suicide. Genereux admitted to being "too generous" when he gave two HIVers each a massive dose of Seconal, a sleeping pill -- knowing they planned the big sleep. One died; the other woke up in a hospital with a tube in his nose.

Hep got hip
HIV's ugly stepsister, hepatitis C, came of age. *The New Yorker* touted it as the next plague, the CDC launched an awareness campaign, the FDA approved a pricey ribavirin/interferon combo treatment, and an HIVer/hep C'er founded an activist group in San Francisco.

Barnes ignoble
When *POZ* included "Free Back-to-School Condoms" in its September "youth" issue, it was eighty-sixed by a Barnes & Noble staffer. When the media picked up the story, the megabookseller first claimed the move was a coincidental stock "adjustment," then, after admitting it had had legal "concerns about *POZ*'s distribution of condoms," renewed its traditional commitment to distribute *POZ* nationwide.

Do as I say, not ...
President Clinton, Monica Lewinsky and Ken Starr gave the nation's kids plenty of sex-ed -- and bless the lovebirds for their creative sex toy. But despite the First 'Fess-Up, "abstinence-only" attitudes continued to block HIV prevention and condom distribution in U.S. high schools. Still, a national survey found less sex and more condoms among teens in '98.

Like pulling teeth
In the year's only big legal win for people with HIV, the Supreme Court ruled that Maine dentist Randon Bragdon violated Sidney Abbott's rights by refusing to treat her because she had HIV.

Abbott's disabled status was challenged because of her lack of debilitating symptoms, but the Supremes agreed that since HIV interfered with her ability to have kids, she was covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act. But as lower courts chip away at the law, this narrow focus left legal AIDS eagles wanting more.

Unecstatic Abbott
While news about the potentially deadly interaction between ritonavir and the street drug ecstasy clubhopped from the UK to the U.S., Abbott Labs (no relation to Sidney) disregarded the pleas of British authorities to issue package warnings.

The way of the dinosaurs
A study stuck the final deadly lance in Glaxo Wellcome's cash bull AZT by showing that its promiscuous cross-resistance may sabotage future anti-HIV regimens. Meanwhile, Bristol-Myers Squibb's flagship nuke d4T outstripped Glaxo in the U.S. market, while BMS's d4T and Glaxo's 3TC proved as potent a combo as Glaxo's megamarketed Combivir (3TC/AZT).

Sustiva trips
The FDA approved DuPont Pharma's once-daily Sustiva (efavirenz). Anti-HIV agent No. 12, the festively named NNRTI has been alternately praised as a possible protease replacement and bashed as a grossly overpriced and understudied product. Along with its record-breaking price, Sustiva holds its own in unpleasantries: dizziness, dream disturbances and psychotic "episodes" likened to mild acid trips. Next up at the FDA: Glaxo's abacavir and Vertex's amprenavir. Then? The pipeline is almost desert dry.

Hemo Wars
Canada's Mounties rode in with a full-scale criminal probe into the Canadian Red Cross and the Canadian Blood Committee's role in the transmission of HIV to people with hemophilia in the early '80s.

The Bleeders Strike Back
Three former cabinet officials in France were charged with "involuntary homicide" for their role in that country's tainted-blood scandal.

The Return of Ricky
And last fall the U.S. Senate approved the Ricky Ray Bill, divvying up $1.7 billion among people who got HIV from blood transfusions in the early '80s.

Ghost in the Oval Office
Although he died last year of a barrage of OIs, ACT UP/DC's tart-tongued warrior Steve Michael "will haunt President Clinton forever," said an activist at his funeral -- where else? -- in front of the White House.

Vacc-tracking
Lucky for them, the 50-odd docs who rolled up their sleeves to receive a vaccine "breakthrough" -- made of a weakened-but-still-live virus -- were turned away. Some monkeys that got a similar shot

got sick or died.

Antique AIDS
In February, *Nature* readers followed Dr. David Ho into Central Africa where, he theorized, HIV originated in the 1940s: A study of 1,000-plus frozen blood samples helped his laboratory to pinpoint the supposed first documented AIDS death -- that of a man in the Belgian Congo -- to 1959.

ASO SOS
Burnout and backlash combined to breed complacency among the deep-pocketed, and donations to AIDS service organizations plummeted nationwide. Behemoths GMHC and APLA downsized, and at least one ASO disappeared.

African-American 911
Even as AIDS activism in other communities was foundering, the Congressional Black Caucus urged the Prez to declare AIDS in the African-American community a “state of emergency.” They won big: A $156 million plan was approved to tackle the problem. Hey, what about those funds for syringe swaps?

Disappearing act
Magic Johnson’s late-night talk show, *The Magic Hour,* was cancelled after just 65 episodes, thus freeing him to do important work in the fight against AIDS, like signing on in October to be Mike Tyson’s financial adviser.

Zimbab-way up
One in four people in Zimbabwe has HIV, the world’s highest-ever rate. When asked at the 12th World AIDS Conference what she thought of the much-touted drug-company initiative to sell antiretrovirals at a reduced rate to the developing world, a leading longtime Zimbabwe activist snapped: “Forget combination therapy. The drugs we need are morphine, morphine and more morphine, so people can die with dignity.”

To C or not to C?
A survey of 8,500 birth records revealed that poz women who had Cesarean sections transmitted HIV to their infants at half the rate of those who didn’t. Combining C-section with antiretrovirals reduced infections even more. Don’t try this at home.

AZT on the cheap
The results of a four-year study in Thailand confirmed what many researchers already suspected -- that a shorter, cheaper course of AZT helps to prevent mom-to-babe transmission. While many hailed it as a success, others slammed the study’s ethics, which allowed thousands of infants whose moms took placebos to get HIV.

One pill makes you bigger ...
Viagra burst on the drug scene, putting spring -- and springtime -- back into the sex lives of HIVers with protease-age penis problems. The pill grossed $1 billion for Pfizer in its first year, but the

euphoria had an edge. First came reports that mixing the blue diamonds with poppers can spell trouble, then rumors of a black market on the gay party circuit, and, finally, calls to criminalize prescribing Viagra to PWAs. Next up: Ladies get lucky, too!

And one pill makes you ...
"Buffalo hump," "protease paunch," "balloon breasts" -- just three examples of schoolyard-type slang used to describe the self-image-sabotaging symptoms of protease-induced lipodystrophy. While many docs pooh-poohed fat redistribution, they took seriously the sky-rocketing cholesterol rates, diabetes and heart attacks that gave some HIVers pause about going down that HAART road.

Early bird gets worm?
Some 75 percent of the nation's 800,000 or so people with HIV are antiretroviralers, many following docs' advice -- and ad hype -- to hit hard, hit early, even when CD4s are high and viral load low. But between side effects, toxicities and resistance, the creed of early intervention is losing some adherents. Leading AIDS researcher Dr. Jay Levy made headlines by boldly weighing in, "Premature initiation of treatment starts the clock ticking too soon, limiting future options and making therapy a necessity for the person's lifetime."

Like Sonny and Cher
After a feud dating back to the 1983 discovery of HIV, rival viral hunters Drs. Luc Montagnier and Robert Gallo shook hands in April over lunch and a pile of dough -- a $100,000 joint research prize from the Warren Alpert Foundation.

Exit, eradication ...
... Enter, remission. Virologists and immunologists finally agreed to bury the hatchet and embark on research that utilizes the best of both worlds. After suppressing viral production with combo therapy, they hope to reboost the immune system. If it works, HIVers may be able to cut combo therapy and control the virus.

If the genes fit
Adding to the "AIDS immunity" myth, National Cancer Institute biologists found that a mutation in the CCR5 gene can keep HIV from invading the immune system. But CCR5 discriminates: 15 percent of whites have the magic mutation -- perhaps a remnant of the 14th-century Black Plague in Europe -- while African and East-Asian immune systems miss out.

Hydroxy-eureka!
The 30-year-old cancer drug hydroxyurea was dusted off and given a twirl when it was found to block HIV replication, strengthen the immune system and help anti-HIV drugs work better. The old gal's a cheap date, too -- she lost her patent years ago.

The PEP squad
Postexposure prophylaxis (PEP) left the hospital and got plastered -- on San Francisco buses and in bars in a UCSF ad campaign encouraging gay men to take emergency antiretrovirals within 72 hours of unsafe sex. The city began a study to test whether PEP prevents seroconversion and

encourages unsafe sex.

Death in the family
While en route to UNAIDS headquarters in Geneva, Dr. Jonathan Mann, the founding father of the global AIDS movement, and his wife, Dr. Mary Lou Clements-Mann, a distinguished HIV vaccine researcher, were killed in the crash of Swissair Flight 111.

Sleeping with the enemy
Miffed at ASO executive salaries passing the $150,000 mark, prickly Michael Petrelis and a handful of other longtime activists founded the AIDS Service Provider Accountability Project to study where AIDS donations go. But Petrelis raised hackles of more than just the fat cats when he hitched his wagon to HIVer-hater Rep. Tom Coburn (R-OK), who professed shock on the floor of Congress that AIDS charity execs had prioritized “lining their own pockets” over “saving lives.”

Pocket full of Kaposi
In the first study to link Kaposi’s sarcoma to sex via human herpes virus 8, University of California, San Francisco, researchers revealed that men with HIV and HHV-8 face a 50 percent chance of developing KS within a decade.

Ich bin ein Berliner
“Once I’m undetectable, can I go off therapy?” was the question on every HIVer’s mind after learning that a Berlin patient and others had quit the cocktail and still kept their virus in check. But researchers refused to pay attention. Finally, Massachusetts General’s Dr. Bruce Walker stepped up to the plate: If his patient’s viral load remains undetectable over time, it could mean a new era in treatment strategy.

Rubber Spice
After cutting out of her “music group,” the artist formerly known as Ginger Spice, Geri Halliwell, grabbed headlines when she accepted the position of Goodwill Ambassador for the UN, where she’ll raise awareness of women’s reproductive rights and combat HIV through safe-sex chat.

From bad...
Proof that a low level of viral load in the blood doesn’t mean less HIV in semen meant that even the most undetectable men should still reach for the rubbers, and disappointing discoveries about “HIV latency” in such reservoirs as the testicles, gut and lymph nodes derailed the eradication juggernaut.

...to worse
At the 12th World AIDS Conference, University of California researchers reported the first documented case of multi-drug-resistant HIV transmission. The finding confirmed suspicions that particular resistances to HIV meds can be passed from partner to partner. The treatment outlook for those unlucky ones is, according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, “as bleak as it was in 1984.”

That’s so ’80s
Exodus Ministries’ homo- and AIDS-phobic full-page ads in *The New York Times, The Wall Street*

Journal and *The Washington Post* served up a side order of hate at millions of readers' breakfasts. The gruesome gay-bashing death of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard in Wyoming gave the media a week of follow-up stories topped by his funeral -- complete with Rev. Fred "God Hates Fags" Phelps.

This sold house
AmFAR had to find a new party central when its head, Dr. Mathilde Krim, sold her Park Avenue manse for $12 million. This fall, Krim -- who had hosted the Kennedys, Kramers and countless AIDS galas -- swung open her doors for one last gathering, an impromptu memorial for Dr. Jonathan Mann. It was the end of an era.

Most Wanted

HIV-Specific CD4

For keeping 1 to 2 percent of HIVers' virus in check au naturel for 18 years and counting. Let's hope immune boosters share the wealth in '99.

Kate Shindle
For not being just another pretty face. Miss America '98 tipped her crown to HIVers and praised safe sex and clean needles. Congrats on her new AIDS Action Council gig.

Scott O'Hara
For steaming up our nights and days. When he died at 36 of lymphoma, the porn-star-cum-Radical Faerie-cum-writer left us like the kid at the end of Shane: Come back, Spunk. Come back.

George Soros

For playing Daddy Warbucks to druggies. The $$$ wiz gave a cool mil to needle exchanges after Clinton refused to lift the ban on federal funds.

Diseased Pariah News
For leaving us breathlessly checking our mailboxes for the latest semi-millennial issue. We're dying to find out how our AIDS Barbie and KS Ken dolls have decorated their new post-protease dream house.

Chris Lanier
For galvanizing the needle-exchange troops and uniting rag-tag resistance groups scattered across the country into one spit-clean army, the National Coalition to Save Lives Now.

Least Wanted

Donna Shalala
For being so reliable in her uselessness as secretary of Health and Human Services and refusing to let the pesky facts about needle exchange sway her loyalty to her boss -- and her own political aspirations.

Abbott’s Liquid Norvir
Just for the taste of it. The loathsome liquid version of the popular protease left thousands gagging after a snafu on the manufacturing line halted production of the capsulized version.

Congressman Gary Ackerman
In order to get to the bottom of your sex life, this Democratic Rep. from Queens, New York, introduced the HIV Partner Notification Bill, which would make states have to dial up your exes if they want any CARE Act dollars.

The cast of Law & Order
For starring in their horrifying April Fool’s episode about cops violating the rights of a person with HIV in order to stop him from “murdering more innocent women.” The title? “Carrier.” Cute.

Brian Stewart
For injecting HIV into his 11-month-old son’s bloodstream to avoid $276 a month in child support. He says he didn’t do it, but cops say the case is airtight. Stay tuned. *Note: Stewart was convicted after this issue went to press.*

Dr. Laura Schlessinger
For infecting the airwaves with her hellspun advice to 12 million listeners daily. A sample of the good doctor’s wisdom? “HIV positive people should not have any kind of sex with anyone!” The peroxide must be slowly seeping in.

AIDS *is* Exceptional

“No more free candlelight suppers and tickets to the opera” was the rallying cry PWAs heard from their growing ranks of critics. “Get off your ass and get a job. And while you’re at it, give us your name.” In a “post”-everything delirium, 1998 saw right-wingers gaining new allies (including the CDC) in their bid to end what they dubbed “AIDS exceptionalism” -- the hard-won package of survival programs and human rights protections for PWAs. In a sign of the times, Gay Men’s Health Crisis flip-flopped on the names-reporting issue, first breaking with the long-established anti-names community consensus, then backpedaling to lead lobbying efforts against it. But from coast to coast, a bipartisan legislative press against HIVers’ privacy was on: “Treat HIV like any other STD!” New York became the 30th state to keep a list of names of people who test positive -- and even added on nasty mandatory partner-notification. But the backlash movement had no answer when advocates asked, With surveys showing that names reporting drives people away from testing, why do you want the virus to spread?

Crimes & Misdemeanors

At the start of 1998, legal advocate Catherine Hanssens of Lambda told *POZ* that fighting criminalization laws is "like Jason from *Friday the 13th.* Just when you think you’ve won, they’re *baaack*." The year was a doozy for HIVers looking over their shoulder for Big Brother. Building on the panic over 20-year-old African American Nushawn Williams, who allegedly infected dozens of young women in upstate New York, strict laws making HIV transmission -- and, in some cases, exposure -- illegal are on the books in 28 states and being debated in others. These laws tend to

penalize only those who know their status -- punishing those who get tested and, in effect, discouraging others from doing so. Several bear the signature phobias of local lawmakers -- singling out transmission by sex workers, hospital patients or inmates. Some prisoners with HIV, once serving standard sentences of a year or two on robbery or drug charges, may now face more than a decade behind bars for spitting on or biting a guard. And guess who wins when it's the guard's word against yours.

Rubber Wars

Sex, sex, sex. That's all we wrote about in 1998. But who can blame us? Face the facts: Between 1985 and 1988, rates of unprotected anal sex in San Francisco dropped from 65 percent to 18 percent. But 1998 marked the crest of the condom-free comeback. How do we know? Well, we get your letters, for one. But the news media got wind of it, too, and was abuzz about increased rectal gonorrhea rates across the board -- a sure sign that people aren't making glove love. While advocates agree that prevention must be reconceived for the "post-AIDS era" and progress was made -- most notably by GMHC's Beyond 2000 campaign -- the pitch of the barebacking debate grew shriller and the camps more polarized. High-profile HIVers fell over themselves to come clean about nights of unbridled lust, even as stories about the dangers of mutant virus played out like old-time horror films. And in a bizarre, late-year twist, Gabriel Rotello, author of *Sexual Ecology,* the canary-in-the-condom-mine tome on the dangers of promiscuity, announced he was giving it all up to move to Burbank and produce a show for VH1.

Fall Into the Gap

Third-World delegates at the 12th World AIDS Conference in Geneva had a hard time being heard over all the "bridging the gap" clamor. Without even the option of hitting hard, hitting early with HIV meds, developing nations -- home to 90 percent of the world's HIVers -- have little use for trade shows with rock-climbing poster boys scaling drug-company booths. Nevertheless, the theme park's theme did force a cold-eyed look at the chasm between the epidemic's rich and poor. Perhaps this inspired the UNAIDS' HIV Drug Access Initiative, which got several pharmaceutical giants to promise to slash drug prices by up to 75 percent for some poor countries. While many lauded the discounts, others, such as nonplayer Merck, wondered whether these nations are best served by triple-drug therapy. In a damning speech at the confab's end, Lancet editor Richard Horton summed up the savage global inequalities by pointing out the petty cruelties visible to all attendees: "Why was it that whenever a speaker from a developing-world country rose to talk about an issue central to 'bridging the gap,' seats emptied and the halls began to bleed delegates? It was nothing less than shameful."

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