The Way We Live Now: Mathilde Krim

Founder, amfAR

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Q: When amfAR was founded 14 years ago, there were few AIDS institutions. Now we have thousands -- but as our sense of crisis fades, what is their future?

A: We have problems when things go badly *and* when things go well. When things go badly people think, What's the point, people are going to die anyway, and when things go well, like now -- when we're reaping the fruits of 10 years of extraordinary science that has truly prolonged lives -- the public has responded to the good news with a lack of concern. We don't have that terrible sense of crisis anymore, even though epidemic is still spreading and we still can't save lives.

We would prefer that pure reasoning would bring in support. But unfortunately the public is very fickle. So a certain amount of tension is still needed in AIDS. We deal with two distinct constituencies. One is government bodies; they've now been educated enough that they understand the threat of AIDS, so that funding should hold. The other is the public at large, which has mostly lost its sense of crisis. Many AIDS organizations, which depend largely on contributions, feel the lack of a sense of crisis translate into a lack of dollars.

We also have the disease wars, where advocates for other illnesses say AIDS gets too much money. We have to fight that and educate the public about how important AIDS research is to medicine in general. Research on AIDS deals with the underpinnings of the immune system, how viruses work -- the same principles can be used for treatment of other diseases.

Q: Where are we headed?

A: We're about halfway on a long road. It may be 10 years before we have curative treatments and a vaccines available, and that's a long time. I worry about whether people can hold out.

It's important to remember how many people we lost, how many died but served the community by participating in clinical trials, saving other people's lives, if not their own.

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