Battling Stigma Alone

Living with HIV in the country of Georgia has been difficult for a doctor who helps others living with the virus.

June 15, 2021 By Dr. Fighter

This is not a story; it is a life with love, happiness, loss, emotions and pain. I'm not using my real name because of safety and privacy issues.

It began when I was 25 years old. I was studying at the medical university. I dreamed of being a surgeon and started my residency in the field of general surgery. After an annual checkup, I received a call from the laboratory, and they said they wanted to see me. My colleague was so sad and held my hand and told me that my HIV result was positive. My world fell apart, but as a bisexual man who had sex with a man, I was not surprised. I felt ashamed and was afraid of my future because in my country, there is a ban on surgeons living with HIV. I went to see the head of the hospital, and he told me that it was true I couldn't work as a surgeon. I live in a region where people living with HIV are discriminated against, and, as an HIV-positive doctor, I knew I was all alone against the hate and shame.

I didn't know how to tell my family. When I did tell them, my mom was so sad. A week later, I had a stroke. Seeing my parents struggle with the news made my condition get worse.

I decided not to tell anyone else about my HIV status and to start a new life with the virus. I changed my residency and decided to become a doctor who could help people living with HIV.

After three years, I became a sexual health specialist. I'm now working with LGBT community–based NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and clinics, where I'm helping people with HIV and other sexual health issues. My patients and my friends do not know that I have HIV. I told my best friend and lost them forever.

My biggest achievement is that my patients trust me. When I was in trouble, I had nobody to open my heart to.

I give public lectures in schools and universities to motivate people to know their HIV status and access care. My dream is to help as many people as I can. Despite my struggles, the HIV-related discrimination and bullying, I will fight for the future until my last second.

After six years of living with HIV, I've also had health problems. My CD4 count is dropping despite

my undetectable viral load. Unfortunately, in my country, HIV care is not the best. I've decided to emigrate to Europe or the United States to keep healthy and stay alive. But it's painful because I don't know how to leave my patients and change my location. I've diagnosed more than 50 patients with HIV every year and worked with more than 500 other people.

I hope that my family and friends will understand and one day the world will stand by everybody living with HIV who needs help.

To anyone who has told me that I have saved their lives, I say thank you because working with you saved mine.

What three adjectives best describe you?

Fighter, innovator, humanist.

What is your greatest achievement?

Being a doctor and helping people living with HIV.

What is your greatest regret?

That I could not work as a surgeon in my country.

What is the best advice you ever received?

Whatever you do, give it 100%.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?

Gareth Thomas.

What drives you to do what you do?

My family, friends and lovely patients.

What is your motto?

"Dream, believe and achieve."

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?

The ring that my boyfriend gave me after learning I was HIV positive.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

A cat because I am self-motivated and self-confident.

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