Editor’s Letter

The Past Is Prologue

January 1, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

The notion that “AIDS is a black disease” is not new. Contrary to some people’s belief that AIDS was, or still is, a disease of gay, white men, the fact is African Americans of both genders have been contracting HIV since the epidemic’s earliest days. But for various reasons, the visibility of black people living with HIV has only recently come to the forefront.

Two years ago, at the International AIDS Conference in Mexico City, I listened to Phill Wilson, CEO and founder of the Black AIDS Institute, an openly gay and HIV-positive man who graces our cover this month, speak about the catastrophic impact of HIV on African Americans. I remember how I felt hearing that if “Black America” were its own nation, its HIV-infection rate would rival that of many countries around the world known to be viral hotbeds. How had we let this happen? How was it possible that more people are living with the virus in Black America than in Botswana, Ethiopia, Guyana, Haiti, Namibia, Rwanda and Vietnam?

Yet, despite the data, there remains a misperception within the black community that AIDS is not a black disease. Or, that it affects only certain kinds of black people who live in certain areas and engage in certain behaviors. True, there are disproportionately high rates among young black men who sleep with men, live in inner cities and/or use drugs. But they are not the only black people affected. AIDS has become the No. 1 killer of black women in America between the ages of 25 and 34.

Wilson and the Black AIDS Institute have set out to teach their community the truth about HIV. Wilson’s message—relayed in the “Greater Than AIDS” campaign—is upbeat and self-empowering. He draws on historical precedence as proof that black Americans can and will rise above even the most onerous of challenges. Black Americans have, for centuries, overcome oppression, racism, discrimination and a lack of compassion and support from much of this nation. Wilson believes they will prove the phrase “the past is prologue” by rising above HIV/AIDS.

Part of the reason we have such a severe—and severely disproportionate—AIDS epidemic in black America is that we came too late to this fight, with far too few resources. This can no longer be tolerated.

As a nation, we must support our black brothers and sisters. Because, as Wilson says, if we can’t

stop AIDS in black America, we can't stop it in America as a whole. The truth is there is no such nation as Black America—only one nation, under God, as the Pledge of Allegiance suggests.

Our black leadership in Washington, DC, is well aware of the impact of AIDS on all Americans, particularly African Americans. President Obama's senior advisor in the White House, Valerie Jarrett, is an African-American woman who lost her sister-in-law to AIDS. Our new surgeon general, Regina Benjamin, is an African-American woman who lost her brother to AIDS. The president will prove his leadership and commitment to fighting HIV/AIDS domestically through developing and implementing a national AIDS strategy—a strategy we hope to see soon.

February 7, 2010, is Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. February is Black History month. So let's join together—with our brothers and sisters of all colors—to ensure that the next triumphant chapter in black history abolishes everyone's slavery to this oppressive virus forever.

Regan Hofmann
Editor in Chief
Email: editor-in-chief@poz.com

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