Guess What: AIDS “Patient Zero” Was No Zero

The letter “O” was misread as the number “0.” Here’s what that “O” stood for.

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Canadian flight attendant Gaëtan Dugas became infamous as “Patient Zero” or, as The New York Post described him in a blazing 1987 cover headline: “The Man Who Gave Us AIDS.” But modern scientific sleuthing has debunked this stigmatizing myth.

First off, genetic researchers looking at blood samples from the late 1970s proved that HIV had been circulating in New York City before Dugas began visiting gay bars there and before he was hired by Air Canada in 1974. (Dugas died of AIDS-related illness in 1984.)

The researchers, led by evolutionary biologist Michael Worobey, PhD, of the University of Arizona in Tucson, presented their findings earlier this year at the 2016 Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI) in Boston. As POZ reported then, their research showed that HIV likely moved from Africa to the Caribbean by 1967 before moving to New York City by 1971; from there, another single virus moved to San Francisco around 1975. By the end of the 1970s, the virus had spread enough in New York City to exhibit genetic diversity.

This month, the researchers’ findings were published in Nature, prompting more mainstream media coverage of the topic.

As The New York Times reports, epidemiologists in the early 1980s didn’t refer to Dugas as “Patient Zero.” They designated him with the letter “O,” which stood for “outside Southern California,” where the study began. But the letter was later misread as the number “zero,” further fueling the myth of a sex-obsessed AIDS monster responsible for the epidemic in North America.

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