Health GAP Founder Alan Berkman, MD, Dies

June 10, 2009

Alan Berkman, MD, a renowned HIV/AIDS doctor and founder of Health GAP (Global Access Project), died of cancer on June 5.

Berkman was a longtime advocate for social justice in health care, sneaking behind government barricades to provide medical care to Native American freedom fighters at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and treating prisoners injured during the Attica Uprising in New York. When he was arrested for removing a bullet from an activist's leg, Berkman refused to testify before a federal grand jury and spent years in prison.

While incarcerated, Berkman advocated for improved medical treatment for his fellow inmates; after his release, he continued to speak out about poor conditions in federal correctional facilities. He then went on to become medical director of Highbridge Woodycrest Center in the Bronx, New York, one of the first skilled nursing facilities for people living with HIV. He later joined the faculty of Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health in New York City, where he dedicated himself to improving treatment access for HIV-positive people around the globe. With that goal in mind, he helped found Health GAP in 1999.

In a statement, Health GAP steering committee member and AIDS activist Jamila Headley described Berkman's life as "so well lived, firmly rooted in a genuine commitment to social justice that led him beyond concern to action, which he sustained for his entire life. His death is such a loss, but he has truly given all of us so much—his time, his passion, his friendship and advice, his ideas, his investment in making the expansion of treatment access possible."

On May 21, Berkman was honored with Health GAP's 2009 Global Health Justice Award alongside David Hoos, MD, MPH. The award has since been renamed the Dr. Alan Berkman Global Health Justice Award.

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