A Call for Improved HIV-Related Scientific Literacy on the Front Lines

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Scientific literacy is poor among non-medical members of the HIV-related workforce, and steps must be taken to address this in order to better fight the epidemic. This is according to a national report by the Black AIDS Institute, produced in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Latino Commission on AIDS, the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors, Johns Hopkins University–Bloomberg School of Public Health, and Janssen Therapeutics.

The report is based upon the HIV Workforce Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs Survey, which measured the knowledge about HIV science and antiretroviral treatment among more than 3,600 non-medical members of the HIV-related workforce in 48 U.S. states and territories. A majority of the respondents were unfamiliar with biomedical prevention of HIV—using antiretrovirals to reduce the risk of HIV transmission—and didn't know enough about how and when such an intervention should be used. The average respondent had a score of 63 percent on the knowledge questions of the survey.

"We are leaving our most valuable and effective resource behind," Phill Wilson, president and CEO of the Black AIDS Institute and one of the principal researchers of the survey, said in a press release. "We have a large infrastructure of committed, passionate, capable folks working in AIDS service organizations, community-based organizations, and health departments ready to finish this task, but they can't do it unless they have the necessary tools, knowledge and skills to get the job done."

The Black AIDS Institute has called for a campaign to address this deficit in scientific literacy in the non-medical HIV workforce, including:

- Training programs to improve workers' ability to link people with HIV to care and retain them in care, as well as helping HIV-negative people stay negative through interventions or pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).
- Creating a certification program for members of the HIV workforce.
- Developing definitions of a core knowledge base and know-how that people in the HIV workforce should have.

- Require workers to engage in continuing education on HIV science and treatment subjects.

Following a recent trend where messaging about the fight against HIV is concerned, the public relations push behind this report frames poor scientific literacy as “the missing link to ending the AIDS epidemic in the U.S.”

“All of the biomedical interventions in the world will not end the AIDS epidemic in this country unless the people on the frontlines understand them, believe in them, and know how to use them,” said Wilson.

Some in the HIV field have argued that insinuating that the United States is anywhere near to an end to the epidemic, or that addressing any one facet of the highly complex HIV epidemic will achieve such a goal, ultimately undermines progress by raising hopes too high too soon. Cynicism and apathy may follow if such lofty goals are not met in short order, such critics argue.

To read the press release, click here.

To read a POZ/AIDSmeds feature on “end of AIDS” sloganeering, click here.

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