Stigma Over Science

HIV-negative writer Mathew Rodriguez penned an opinion piece about U=U titled "HIV-Negative Men Are Still Choosing Stigma Over Science." It was originally published on Into. Below is an edited excerpt.

February 18, 2019 By Mathew Rodriguez

HIV-negative men need to do better. On a purely human level, research data show that HIV-negative men refuse to see HIV-positive people as anything other than a virus floating in their blood. Something's gone awry.

As a fellow HIV-negative man, I understand the myriad reasons you might not yet believe that undetectable equals untransmittable (U=U). It's not actually about learning something new but unlearning lifelong messages that just being gay and loving other men would most likely lead to acquiring HIV. And much of that public health messaging often sold HIV-positive gay men down the river.

Aside from public health messaging, so much of gay male culture revolves around the virus as a shared history. Movies and plays about the American queer experience often portray the AIDS epidemic to differing effect. While it can serve as a way to unite the community by exploring our shared history, it can also create trauma.

Every HIV-negative man also has a personal relationship to HIV, unrelated to its public or cultural portrayals. Though I am not HIV positive, I watched my father, a loving man and a heroin user, die after years of living with HIV as well as an array of coinfections.

Though it's easy to see the root of this long-held stigma, that doesn't excuse its survival. In the era of U=U, believing that HIV-positive people with an undetectable viral load can pass the virus is akin to denying climate change. The scientific consensus is there. It's you who are choosing to ignore it based on your own firmly held beliefs.

Yes, as queer men, we have trauma around HIV and that trauma needs to be respected. But for you HIV-negative men who decide your trauma is more important than an HIV-positive person's personhood, it's important you acknowledge that the problem is your stigma, not a person's virus.

When I've said this online in the past, I've gotten pushback from HIV-negative men saying that I'm telling people whom they have to sleep with or that I'm saying they're a bigot for making choices about their own body. That's not the case. What I am saying is that there is an array of methods at

your disposal for lowering your risk of acquiring the virus. There are condoms, PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis], PEP [post-exposure prophylaxis] and HIV treatment. But fear and stigma are not forms of protection. Your fear will not prevent you from acquiring anything. Holding on to it is doing nothing but creating a gap between you and other queer people, and it's your duty to let go of your fear, not only for yourself but also for the HIV-positive people it harms.

Fear of HIV continues to wreak havoc on the lives of people living with HIV. While advances in medicine have made life with HIV easier in many ways, stigma and fear around the virus have failed to diminish at the same rate. Aside from individual interactions with HIV-positive people, the amount of fear in the world continues to make it easy for politicians and people in the criminal justice system to punish those who have HIV just for living. Your fear is not just your own; it perpetuates a societal viral divide that we should be dismantling, not buttressing.

It takes a ton of work to overcome stigma and trauma, but a beautiful phenomenon awaits on the other side of stigma. When you do the work to unlearn it, you make room to recognize the humanity of HIV-positive people and you make room for deeper intimacy and connection. For too long, the work of forging this connection has been left to HIV-positive people, who have had to deal with HIV medically and socially. But the fight can't be theirs alone. If research data highlight anything, it's that HIV-negative people are refusing to do the work, even when we're the ones causing the harm.

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