600,000 Deaths. How Many Were Preventable?

Since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the US, there have been an estimated 700,000+ deaths. A little over a year into COVID? 600,000.

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Loss.

It's a word that we all know well, or will know at some point. Because one of the toughest aspects of this human existence is grieving the loss of a loved one, and that inevitability is a byproduct of one of our greatest strengths, which is the ability to love.

Grieving gets a lot harder to deal with when that loss is one that could have been prevented. In the bleeding disorders community, the greed of "big blood" and their unwillingness to safeguard their product at a crucial time in the early days of the epidemic added another painful level to the mourning process. And the reaction to COVID-19 by the Trump administration reminded a lot of people in the AIDS community of Reagan's callous and calculated incompetence when faced with the responsibility of protecting the well-being of their fellow citizens.

Ultimately, in a capitalist society it usually comes down to a profits over people attitude, and the cruel calculations that are a huge part of politics.

The official death toll in the US as a result of COVID-19 is 600,000. 600,000. It's a staggering number. I understand that it's dicey territory comparing one virus to another, but consider this: it took four decades to reach that number in US deaths related to AIDS. I gotta believe that this number, like COVID-19 mortalities, could have been a lot lower. Action in place of disdain puts at least 100,000 people back in the game, living their lives, and giving and receiving love to the people in their community.

And remember, death tolls aren't the entire story. Each loss represents so many other lives that go on, forever changed. What's worse is that, when those deaths are preventable, there's a scarring that occurs...

I write all of this from the the perspective of a long-term survivor of HIV. When I get upset about some "trivial" matter, I feel worse about it and don't know why until I process the subconscious embarrassment of not being on a higher plain of gratitude as the result of my good fortune. I usually come around to embracing those trivial slights life throws at us. But sometimes I don't give

myself proper time to deal with a situation in real time, because an inner voice says, “You’re lucky to be alive, kid.” So I just brush something off until it slithers back to the forefront. The older I get, thankfully, the less I put those things off. And whenever I wear my AIDS Memorial t-shirt, I feel the spirit of those who have gone on before me to whatever that next adventure is, if there is one.

And it helps.

One of the things that hurt most about the COVID-19 pandemic was how uncaring so many people were. Not just the decision-makers, but our fellow citizens. In that regard, it was a traumatic reliving of the earliest days of the AIDS pandemic. The enormous COVID-19 death toll is proof positive that, when the next pandemic rolls around, even if we are lucky to have compassionate leadership when it occurs we will still be living side-by-side with a quarter of the population unwilling to be inconvenienced even if it means saving the lives of strangers.

Not one to end on a downer, I have to acknowledge the heroes that emerged in the AIDS crisis, from activists to hospital staff to community members that reached out with compassion when someone needed it the most. That same spirit in the face of ignorance was on display during COVID-19, and must be present moving forward if we hope to prevent the death toll from rising as new strains emerge.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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