Army Wives Tackle HIV

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By Lauren Tuck (Editorial Assistant, POZ)>/p>

I shouldn't get hooked on Lifetime's hit show *Army Wives*. You know those videos when soldiers are returning home from overseas and they decide to surprise their families by jumping out of boxes or disguising themselves as the pizza delivery person? Well I love those, and I bawl my eyes out every time I watch. (Note to my coworkers: Anytime you hear me crying in my cubicle, ignore it, I'm fine.) So when I heard that the show *Army Wives* featured an HIV-related plotline, I was well prepared with tissues and waterproof mascara before I tuned in.

From extensive research of the previous five seasons I think this may be the most dramatic show on cable. From hostage situations to marital infidelity, there isn't a sticky situation that the show hasn't handled (gracefully I might add), and now HIV can be thrown into the very large pot of tear-jerking storylines.

At the end of season five (2011), Joan Burton, a colonel in the U.S. Army, and her husband, Roland, a psychiatrist, adopt David, an 11-year-old boy living with HIV. They handle his introduction into their small family and group of tight-knit friends without a hitch. But in this past week's episode, called "Viral," the Burtons face their first challenge of parenting an HIV-positive child.

While David is playing basketball with his buddy Dustin at an after-school club, Dustin accidentally hits David and he gets a bloody nose. The boys run to Roland, who is walking the grounds with Charlie, the after-school supervisor, to get help. Roland and Charlie notice that Dustin has blood on his hand, and the boy says that it mostly belongs to David but some of it is his because his scab came off when they were playing.

After cleaning the boys off, Charlie and Roland take them to the hospital where they are met by Joan. Dustin's parents, Blaine and Amy Ridgeway, are also there. Dr. Pate takes the Ridgeways aside to explain the incident. The scene goes down as follows:

Dr. Pate: First, let me assure you that your son is perfectly fine; his scab came off while playing

basketball. David had a nosebleed, and some of David's blood got on Dustin's hand.

Blaine Ridgeway: So what's the big deal?

DP: You were called here because David is HIV positive, which means there is a remote possibility...

Amy Ridgeway: Our son has AIDS!

DP: No, Mrs. Ridgeway, HIV is not AIDS, it is a virus that can lead to AIDS.

BR: But he could have HIV?

DP: It is extremely unlikely. David's viral load is so low right now we classify it as undetectable. I examined Dustin's scrape, which doesn't appear to have bled much at all, further minimizing the risk of infection.

BR: But there's still a risk?

DP: A very slight risk. I know it’s upsetting to hear there’s any risk at all, but let me assure you I consulted with the experts.

AR: And what did they say?

DP: Given the circumstances their recommendation is we do nothing right now.

BR: What?

DP: We’ll test again in three months to be certain Dustin is negative.

AR: Wait, our son could have HIV, and you don’t want to do anything about it?

DP: The odds against it are so overwhelming I can’t recommend the course of treatment.

AR: Why, what’s the treatment?

DP: It’s two doses of highly potent medicine, every day for 30 days. The side effects can include nausea, diarrhea and risk to the liver and kidneys. It would be extremely unpleasant for your son.

AR: OK, so we just roll the dice and hope that Dustin doesn’t get sick?

DP: It’s the medically responsible course of action.

Amy Ridgeway believes that it was irresponsible for the Burtons to not disclose David’s HIV status to the rest of the school and she spreads the news like wildfire among the Army base. As a result, the kids at school treat David poorly, calling him a freak and rescinding their friendships.

David is discouraged and rightfully upset. But, before the Burtons resort to home schooling their son, Charlie decides to hold a town hall meeting so community members can voice their concerns as well as hear the facts and figures of the virus from an HIV specialist.

After a bitter battle, eventually the Ridgeways back down and David will return to school with his friends by his side.

Although I believe that this episode went where no show has gone before, I am disappointed that the issue was solved so quickly. There are no unresolved issues for next week or drawn-out plot points that will pop up all season long. Raising awareness of HIV/AIDS week to week is much more powerful than a one-hour cut-and-dried scenario.

But, even if the show isn’t running with the narrative, an advocate has arisen from its admirable efforts. Wendy Davis, the actress who portrays Joan Burton, has collaborated with AMothersFight.org to raise awareness for pediatric AIDS and mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Click here to read a blog she wrote for The Huffington Post.

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