Enlist In the End of AIDS

July 18, 2012 By Regan Hofmann

Recent scientific advances have proved that the end of AIDS is possible, perhaps even in our lifetimes if we do enough of the right stuff, at the right levels, right now.

But to secure the political and financial capital necessary to make the possibility of the end of AIDS a reality, there must be a massive, visible, loud, strategic and unified response to the pandemic.

It's high time for a surge of new troops, a revised battle plan and a fresh era of fighting in the global war on AIDS. And it's a perfect time for you to engage today, as people are packing bags all over the world, about to join a throng of 25,000 people convening in Washington, DC at the XIX International AIDS Conference where the discussion will focus on--as the theme of the conference suggests--how we "turn the tide" on AIDS together.

Many of you were there in the beginning of the pandemic. Many of you are too young to have been there. When AIDS first started ravaging bodies--wasting pounds of flesh off frames in weeks, covering people with huge cancerous purple spots known as Kaposi's sarcoma, blinding people, leaving them deaf in a cave of silence, wracking their lungs with pneumonia and wrenching young, healthy people from the prime of their lives--people were understandably terrified, and very, very, angry.

Because of misperception, fear and stigma, people living with the virus were barred from receiving health care in some hospitals. If they were admitted, their food was often left outside their rooms and got cold. Their doors were covered with biohazard symbols. People wore masks to visit them. When they died their bodies were wrapped in black garbage bags and many morgues refused to take them. Some of those who were still alive, and their friends, lovers, partners, neighbors and families, refused to accept the state of affairs and started activist groups to agitate for change.

The famous ACT UP (it stands for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was founded in New York City in the 1980s and it became the platinum example for how a small group of ordinary people from a diverse set of backgrounds with a wide array of ideologies and very different skills could coalesce organically to channel fear into anger, anger into action and action into change that has saved the lives of millions.

All of us alive today with HIV have those early activists to thank for our survival. They ensured improved health care and greater human rights for people with HIV/AIDS. They helped lobby for legislation that protected people living with HIV/AIDS from discrimination. They pressured state and federal governments to talk openly about the topic of HIV/AIDS. They persuaded Congress to

allocate more money to the care of people with HIV and to the research needed to help develop treatments for HIV/AIDS. They helped fast-track the development of certain drugs, they altered the way the Federal Drug Administration approved medicines (enabling them to do so faster so more people could get life saving drugs quicker). They influenced the way the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other organizations conduct AIDS research. And they ensured that people living with HIV were sitting in the room and at the decision making tables when decisions affecting our lives were being made. In short, they made sure the collective needs of a growing and increasingly diverse community were heard--and answered.

The early AIDS activists were effective for three main reasons: They were fueled by fury, they supported their arguments with irrefutable scientific evidence and they showed up--in the offices of pharmaceutical executives, at presidential election rallies, on Capitol Hill in the offices of Congress, in houses of state legislations--and sometimes, as they did when they covered Senator Jess Helms' house in an enormous condom to protest his reluctance to help people with HIV, in political leaders' personal domains.

The early activists were experts in AIDS policy, law, science and research. They knew as much as the people they asked for change and their arguments were hard to dismiss or refute because they were based on facts, because they presented logical and viable solutions (many of which saved healthcare dollars) and because they presented those arguments and requests with profound emotion, in person, in unison and en masse. They were a group of people who would not--and therefore could not--be ignored.

When ACT UP first released their collective power, there were about 2,000 people living with HIV hurtling toward disease and death. We've come a long way in some ways since then. As a result of early AIDS activism there are now 30 medications that help people with HIV stay healthy and that help slow the spread of the virus. But the war on AIDS is far from over. Though 6 million people with the virus are accessing life-sustaining care and treatment, tragically, for the other 28 million people living with HIV worldwide (750,000 of whom are in the United States), HIV remains a death sentence.

This is where you come in. All of us whose lives were spared by the bravery, unrelenting efforts and heroism of those who came before us must help finish what they started. And we need many new friends and supporters to join our ranks.

The end game of today's war on AIDS is ensuring that we help all who are living with HIV know their status, that we connect as many people as we can to life-sustaining treatment to keep them alive and to prevent future cases of HIV while we hunt aggressively and quickly for a cure and/or preventive and therapeutic vaccines.

This is why POZ has launched the POZ Army, a global, grassroots collective of people fighting for the cure/vaccine for AIDS--and prevention, treatment and human rights for all people at risk for or living with HIV/AIDS until a cure is found. Many of you are already recruits. We hope many more of you will join us today. We have revised and re-launched the POZ Army and it now directs you to

many specific, critical actions that need the power of your voice and your promotion via social media.

It seems absurd, almost criminal, that we have the medical solutions to a disease like HIV/AIDS and are not administering them better, to more people in need. But the tide is turning. There is new leadership, attention and commitment to the issue on Capitol Hill. There are brand new bills to help people with HIV/AIDS making the rounds of Congress as I write and petitions and declarations all focused on ending AIDS are flying around cyberspace. And the world is listening. You can see all the action on the POZ Army Facebook page--a base camp of sorts for a new era of AIDS activism.

By joining the POZ Army, you will be personally engaged in the action and have a direct impact on decisions that impact the lives of tens of millions of people living with the virus.

President FDR is famous for responding to a group of activists asking for his support thus: “I agree with you, I want to do it, now make me do it.” It is again time to make our global political leaders do what we know can be done: herald in the end of AIDS. By joining the POZ Army, you will help our generation be the one that finishes what the brave souls who came before us started. Enlist today at POZ Army. And lace up your boots. We’re going back to the front lines.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/enlist-today-to-end