

## **HIV/AIDS epidemic rages on in city, while many in denial**

It may come as a shock to learn that thousands of New Yorkers continue to be diagnosed with HIV/AIDS each year. News about HIV/AIDS is relegated to the back pages, a footnote that flits in and out of public consciousness. Under this veil of denial is the stark reality that New York City remains the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the U.S., and that public ignorance and delusion continue to be a significant problem for those of us who work in this health field.

More than 100,000 people have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in New York City, according to the city Health Department - more cases than Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami and Washington combined. The Health Department estimates that a far greater number of New Yorkers are infected, yet go untested.

The social and political waters surrounding the HIV/AIDS crisis have moved from the national panic of the 1980s to arguably a more dangerous place of mainstream ignorance during the past decade. Many Americans perceive HIV/AIDS as a disease that afflicts those "over there" in the backwaters of Third World countries. For others, it afflicts American communities that are easy to place out of sight and mind.

In fact the demographics of those afflicted have shifted, as HIV/AIDS is predominantly a people-of-color disease. It is also a disease of poverty that further stigmatizes the poor.

Young women in particular have been hard-hit by this virus. At the AIDS Center of Queens County, approximately 45% of our new clients are women, predominantly women of color with children.

Overall, one-third of new AIDS diagnoses in New York City are among mostly minority women, heterosexual sex being the primary mode of transmission. Women often go for treatment only after their family needs are managed; and usually, by the time women seek treatment, they are ill.

Support provided by AIDS service organizations, such as ACQC, are critical for families to survive.

Ironically, medical advancements in HIV/AIDS treatment have had unintended negative consequences. Young people perceive HIV/AIDS as a chronic illness that can easily be treated with drug "cocktails." The diminished perceived threat among these young immortals will possibly cause another generation of our youth to be destroyed by this virus.

Political complacency on the federal level has also contributed to the public malaise. Rather than increasing funds to help curtail this epidemic, the U.S. government recently cut Ryan White funding to states like New York.

This move will further diminish support services for families in need. Medical care without a comprehensive support system will put a Band-Aid on the epidemic when families are bleeding profusely.

There is some good news for New York. The current city administration led by Mayor Bloomberg and Health Commissioner Thomas Frieden continue to keep HIV/AIDS a priority. Syringe-exchange programs, however unpopular among some communities, have proved to be extremely effective in stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Bloomberg and Frieden have fought hard to implement the needle-exchange programs, which have led to a 75% decrease of HIV among intravenous drug users, according to Health Department statistics.

Still, our public-minded will needs to be more determined. Although schools, for example, seem an obvious place to raise HIV/AIDS awareness, our educational system continues to lag.

A comprehensive curriculum is lacking, and many school districts still forbid condom distribution. Recently, at a Youth Conference held at York College, more than 320 middle school and high school students were provided frank information by leading HIV/AIDS educators and physicians.

Yet these students were prevented from being voluntarily tested or even taking condoms. Teachers present acknowledged that they would be disciplined if they allowed the students to participate in sexually explicit or drug-related discussions. As it stands, testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases are not allowed in city school districts.

New York City is the educational and cultural capital of the world. Yet our failure to address sex and drugs in an open, nonjudgmental discourse will allow HIV/AIDS epidemic to march on unchallenged. We must stop this epidemic from destroying our future. New Yorkers are better than this.