Hepatitis C and HIV: Honoring World AIDS Day

December 1, 2014 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

In 1981, HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, emerged in the US. It was associated with gay men, and later injection drug users. We can be harsh critics, and America turned its back on those who were infected. Many died lonely, miserable deaths. Perhaps we never fully confronted our stigma about those living with HIV, but we were forced to confront our management of it when it was apparent that HIV was an equal opportunity destroyer.

Now, hepatitis C virus is threatening us. Since 2007, more people have been dying from hepatitis C than from HIV. You would think that we would have learned from the HIV and AIDS experience, that we would have said NEVER AGAIN. You would think that our government would have taken notes during the HIV epidemic and applied them to hepatitis C, acting swiftly to steer us in a safer direction. However, these lessons remain unheeded.

I don't want to compare HIV with hepatitis C, especially today on World AIDS Day. Both viruses deserve equal attention and immediate solutions in order to protect everyone. I am not comparing two viruses; I am comparing our public health policy towards both. In short, we are sorely lacking and have much to learn.

In honor of World AIDS Day, I am reminded of a powerful speech delivered in 1992 by Mary Fisher. A prominent woman with ties to Washington, Fisher addressed the Republican National Convention as a person living with HIV. Her speech, A Whisper of AIDS, was a call to action.

"*We may take refuge in our stereotypes but we cannot hide there long. Because HIV asks only one thing of those it attacks: Are you human? And this is the right question: Are you human? Because people with HIV have not entered some alien state of being. They are human. They have not earned cruelty and they do not deserve meanness. They don't benefit from being isolated or treated as outcasts. Each of them is exactly what God made: a person. Not evil, deserving of our judgment; not victims, longing for our pity. People. Ready for support and worthy of compassion*."

In the U.S., approximately 25% of those who live with HIV are also coinfected with hepatitis C. Tragically, many are dying from hepatitis C. Whether you have HIV, hepatitis C, or both, we are people, not diseases. Yes, we deserve compassion, but we also need access to health care, better treatment, and a future free from HIV and hepatitis C.

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