Hepatitis C, on the Eve of World AIDS Day

November 30, 2015 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

Tomorrow is World AIDS Day. Conceived in 1987, and then officially designated a year later, World AIDS Day began when someone imagined a world without our brothers and sisters who were (and still are) dying from HIV-related illnesses. Imagine a world without art spoke to our hearts. The fact that a stereotype was being exploited to advance a cause did not matter, because it worked. A world without art was a shattering concept, and helped to wake us up to the depth of the HIV crisis.

Simultaneously, another crisis was brewing: the viral hepatitis epidemic. Worldwide, roughly one million people die every year from viral hepatitis. In the U.S., death from hepatitis C eclipsed HIV-related deaths in 2007, but few noticed this. More than 5 million people in the U.S. live with hepatitis B and C. If you use the more accurate data that includes high risk populations, this number may be around 8 to 9 million. The majority of people who are infected with hepatitis C do not know they have it. Still, no postage stamp, no day without art.

I am a reluctant to suggest a stereotype in order to promote hep C awareness. After all, the stereotype portraying hep C patients as injection drug users has created a monumental stigma for those affected by this most common blood-borne viral infection in the U.S.

But, what if we had a world without baby boomers? Or a world without musicians and other artists? Hep C has already claimed the lives of Lou Reed, Ken Kesey, Evil Knieval, Mickey Mantle, Jim Nabors, Timothy Leary, Anita Roddick and many others. Hep C also claimed the lives of many of my patients, friends and fellow advocates, far too many to name. Hep C could have also taken David Crosby, Greg Allman, Naomi Judd, Natalie Cole, and Pamela Anderson, but medicine intervened. Medical intervention spared the lives of my friends Karen, Chris, Jack, Lynn, Jane, Mike, Teresa, Rick and others.

I am also on the spared list. Now cured, I lived with hep C for 25 years. And although I am grateful, I am not satisfied. It's hard to be a survivor when others are still dying. Worse, they are dying from a curable disease. Hepatitis C is treatable, but many don't have access to treatment. Really, who needs a postage stamp when what we really need is for doctors to test and treat their patients, and for insurance companies to pay for treatment. If we cure this disease, we won't need a day dedicated to it.

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