In Praise of Nurses in AIDS Care: 30 Years of Compassion and Heroism

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As we approach the 30th anniversary of AIDS, those of us who have invested so much of our lives to the struggle against the epidemic cannot help but reflect on both how far we have come and how far yet there is to go. When I look back at the 3 decades of my life, both personal and professional, spent fighting this disease, I am incredibly thankful for the amazing men and women who make up our nation’s nursing community. They have been a consistent source of support and strength for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), myself included, and countless others in the community.

During the earliest years of the epidemic, medically, little could be done for PLWHA. Compassionate and heroic nurses, who have always made up the front lines of our nation’s health care delivery system, did what they could to treat the spirit of their patients, unable to do anything for their bodies but alleviate some of the pain. They served as patient advocates and allies during a time when fear and misinformation meant many Americans wanted nothing to do with the HIV-infected. Nurses became family to many, some of whose actual families refused to see them.

It was during those first years that I was called to activism. I did so out of necessity. My friends were dying, and like so many of my generation, I felt compelled to step up and take action. Thankfully, I was not alone. The amazing nurses who cared for my loved ones were an incredible source of inspiration for me. They did what they could in our hospitals and clinics, but it was incumbent on the rest of us to make sure that there was the political will to support their efforts, as well as the efforts of the broader medical and research communities.

From the beginning, the AIDS epidemic has been most severe in marginalized populations—gay men, drug users, communities of color, and the poor. For too many years, the political establishment turned a blind eye to the plight of these communities. But the egalitarian nature of nursing care has always reflected the best of American principles. Their empathy and dedication helped inspire millions to take action and is reflected in the mission of the many AIDS organizations dedicated to mitigating the impact of the epidemic, including the National Minority AIDS Council.

At the center of all of our work—nurses and advocates alike—is a belief that every patient deserves the same quality of care, regardless of race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. Thirty years later, we find ourselves entering a new phase in the struggle against HIV and AIDS. In the midst of alarmingly high infection rates that have remained constant for years, as well as calls from Washington for massive budget cuts and other deficit-reduction measures, there are fresh efforts to renew and energize America’s response to this disease.

The passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, and the formation of initiatives like the National HIV/AIDS Strategy, could have a tremendous impact on the lives of those already living with HIV and AIDS, as well as preventing countless new infections. They highlight the importance of attacking the epidemic where it is most...
severe, specifically among minority communities. Other initiatives like the Enhanced Comprehensive HIV Prevention Plans, the 12 Cities Project, and the HHS Action Plan to Reduce Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities further bear out this principle.

But while those of us in Washington and in the broader advocacy community are working to hash out the details of these complex programs, nurses serving on the ground all across this country will play an incredibly important role in their implementation. As such, it's critical that the perspective of these nurses is heard and incorporated in any implementation plan. Nurses understand as well as anyone the unique challenges this epidemic poses, and their insight will be invaluable moving forward.

Nurses have been a constant in the battle against this epidemic, and I am honored to stand by their side in that fight. Together with the HIV community, we can reduce HIV infections, increase access to care, minimize health disparities, and finally bring an end to this epidemic.

Disclosures

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