



30 Years and Still Counting

Thirty years ago, Sandra Ford, a drug technician for the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), officially notes an increase in requests for pentamidine for the treatment of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP). A paper napkin was later taped to Sandra's door stating: "In this office in April 1981, Sandra Ford discovered the epidemic that would later be known as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome."¹ In addition, six women in the United States were noted to have an unexplained underlying cellular immune deficiency.² It was a description of the same phenomenon among five previously healthy young gay white men, however, that prompted the 1981 MMWR report now viewed as the first official recognition of AIDS.³ A retrospective study of underlying causes of death suggested that 48 young women died of AIDS in the years 1980–1981.⁴ Although not described in the report, based on the epidemiological data since then, it can be concluded that these women were, most likely women of color, specifically African-American or Latina women between the ages of 15 and 44 years.⁵ Early in the epidemic, the early public health response was not focused on African-American communities in most of the country — despite evidence of an emerging epidemic — thus leaving a segment of the population ignorant in its understanding of the virus and its spread as well as its potentially devastating effect on their community as a whole.⁶

On August 2008, the CDC released a new estimate of the annual number of new HIV infections in the U.S, revealing that the HIV epidemic is —and has been —worse than previously known. That estimate indicated that approximately 56,300 people were newly infected with HIV in the U.S. in 2006, which is higher than CDC's previous estimate of 40,000. The new estimate also confirmed that Black women were most heavily affected by HIV.⁷ Further, in 2009, the rate of AIDS diagnoses among Black women (35.1) was more than 23 times as high as the rate for white females (1.5). The highest rates of AIDS diagnoses were among Black women in the Northeast (52.4) and in the South (36.1). An estimated 6,632 Black women and girls were diagnosed with HIV infection in 2009. This number is higher than the combined total for white (1,700) and Hispanic (1,625) females. The rate of HIV infection among African-American women (47.8) was nearly 20 times as high as the rate for whites (2.4) and more than 4 times as high as the rate for Hispanics/Latinos (11.9).⁸

As we enter the 4th decade of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the impact of this disease on African-American women in the U.S. can no longer be ignored. As prevalence and incidence rates in the African-American community increase, so does the risk for HIV transmission among African-American women. The estimated lifetime risk of becoming infected with HIV is 1 in 30 for Black females, a far higher risk than for white females. The statistics reveal the fundamental need for the development of a national women-focused HIV/AIDS policy agenda to effectively address HIV/AIDS among Black women in the United States. The data shows that the burden of HIV infection falls heavily on the shoulders of Black women. Although there has been increasing attention to and resources allocated for HIV/AIDS, Black women are still not full participants in the HIV/AIDS response even though we are on the frontlines pioneering initiatives that are central to the success of the AIDS response.

This epidemic is far from over and there are troubling signs that for African-American women the real battle has just begun. The disproportionate concentration of HIV/AIDS among Black women is an especially striking trend and efforts to stem the tide of the epidemic among this cohort will increasingly depend on how and to what extent the socioeconomic and political status of Black women is addressed in this country. The Federal AIDS agenda must begin to fully reflect the realities of the lives of Black women living with and at risk of this deadly disease and begin to invest in the leadership of Black women and employ them as recognized agents of change rather than recipients of services.

About the National Black Women's HIV/AIDS Network (NBWHAN)

The NBWHAN has been successful in working with many advocacy groups as well as local and national organizations to garner support for women's issues in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Founded in 2007 the NBWHAN has worked to influence the development of research initiatives and resources that will have a positive impact on program development and design for women and produce scientific based evidence of success. The NBWHAN is a community led initiative born out of the urgent need for Black women to set and implement a national HIV/AIDS agenda for Black women and adolescent girls in the areas of prevention, care, treatment, public policy and funding for all Black women and adolescent girls living with or at risk of HIV and AIDS and their families. You can contact the NBWHAN at 1-888-812-0043 or visit our website at www.nbwhan.org.

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