

Learn From Haiti

by Howard Hiatt

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BOSTON -- Of the 28 million people in Africa with AIDS, no more than 25,000 have access to medications. Officials of both Western nations and some affected countries -- like South Africa, which has millions in immediate need of treatment -- have said that poor countries have too few clinics and doctors and that their populations are too poorly educated to allow treatment of all infected people. This contention has become familiar in the debate over international financing to treat H.I.V.

But it is a misconception. At a health center in Haiti, a country at the very bottom of the economic heap, H.I.V. infections are controlled as effectively as in America. And the success at this health center, sponsored by Partners in Health, a nonprofit charity affiliated with Harvard Medical School, could be replicated all over the world if the wealthy nations chose to provide the financing. The barrier to the use of AIDS drugs for all H.I.V. patients is not some physical or educational impossibility; it is lack of will.

The center is in Cange, an impoverished village of small houses with corrugated roofs and dirt floors. There and nearby, care is delivered with skill and personal attention comparable to that in American teaching hospitals.

The compound was begun in 1983 by Paul Farmer, a physician and anthropologist now at Harvard Medical School, and the Rev. Fritz Lafontant, a Haitian Episcopal priest. Working with Dr. Farmer and Jim Yong Kim, another American physician-anthropologist, are Haitian doctors and nurses and about 200 community health workers, who make this model of health care succeed.

About 1,400 of the patients have H.I.V.; of these, 100 of the sickest receive the advanced medicines used to treat AIDS in the United States and now function normally. Their care is supervised by the local health workers, who are trained at the clinic. The health center's operations are financed by donations, and the doctors will treat another 100 desperately ill patients with the AIDS drugs if they can persuade drug companies to donate them.

Partners in Health also applies the principles used in Cange at a center in Peru and one in Mexico. In each case, training community health workers allows the development of a system that can offer sustained treatment for people ill with hard-to-cure diseases. The center in Lima has cured more than 80 percent of patients with drug-resistant tuberculosis -- something many tuberculosis experts and even the World Health Organization had thought impossible.

What these doctors do to treat H.I.V. infection is a small effort against a huge worldwide problem. But they have shown that if we do not treat the millions of Africans who are dying of AIDS, it is because we have chosen not to, not because we can't.

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