Label Liability

Does calling HIV a “black disease” help us or hurt us?

December 2, 2009 By Kat Noel

African Americans make up 13 percent of the U.S. population and 51 percent of the country’s HIV cases. Because of this disproportionate HIV rate, some media outlets have called it a “black disease.” That label might bring needed attention to efforts to prevent and treat HIV in our communities. But it might also amplify the existing stigma connected with the virus—and that could hurt those efforts along with our ability to stem the epidemic.

Plus, increasing stigma can undermine prevention efforts by allowing people to view HIV as someone else’s problem.

The attention is crucial, says C. Virginia Fields, president and CEO of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS. As African-American HIV rates continue to rise, she says, “any opportunity to educate people and raise awareness is positive. I don’t see the already-existing stigma and discrimination getting worse just because [some people] call the virus a black disease.”

The label is “both reality and stigma,” says Claudia Pryor Malis, who directed and produced a new documentary about the AIDS epidemic among African Americans, *Why Us? Left Behind and Dying*. “Our entire history in this country involves living through undeserved stigma,” Pryor Malis says, “so HIV is just another example.”

Fields and Pryor Malis agree that a discussion about labels diverts attention from the real issue: Why is the HIV infection rate among African Americans so high, and what can be done about it?

For Pryor Malis, the answer involves choosing between fear and self-love. “If we love ourselves enough,” the filmmaker says, “we’ll take steps to protect ourselves. If we had self-esteem, we’d have better tools to fight the virus.”

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