Normalizing the Virus

Should HIV be considered just another chronic disease?

June 4, 2018 By Kate Ferguson

Today, HIV is no longer considered a death sentence nor do clinicians treat the virus as anything other than an infection. Thanks to antiretroviral medications, people living with HIV can manage the virus with a few drugs (sometimes with several meds combined in just one pill) and live long and healthy lives.

This is why a large number of medical professionals regard HIV as a manageable condition. But this view concerns some who believe that making HIV an ordinary illness may lead to complacency about the virus, which, in turn, may result in serious setbacks, such as reduced funding for research and an increase in new infections.

Bob Leahy, the former publisher of PositiveLite.com, an online magazine for people with the virus, says the problem with looking at HIV as a strictly medical matter is that this perspective doesn't take into account the stigma, disclosure and criminalization issues that people with the virus face.

As HIV is normalized—for example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that community health centers routinely offer patients HIV testing in order to lessen stigma—some of the issues that have made the virus more exceptional than other illnesses may become less important to address.

But often there's a huge gap between the perception of HIV as a chronic illness and the daily experiences of those living with the virus. Leahy says that although the epidemic is perceived differently now, the unique problems those living with the virus must contend with should not be dismissed.

So Leahy worries. "I get edgy when I see these truths ignored," he says.

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