

Africa Is Dying Slowly

Every age has its sickness. The Great Plague of the Dark Ages gave way to the syphilis and smallpox of the Enlightened Age, which then gave way to the tuberculosis of the 19th century. The 20th century has its two great scares, cancer and AIDS. Cancer has been lurking throughout man's past under a myriad of different names, but AIDS however, is really a new virus for a new century.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS, is a collection of symptoms resulting from damage to the immune system caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). The infection can be transmitted through sexual intercourse, shared needles, blood transfusions and from mother to child during the birthing process. Though various treatments exist, there is no cure. Approximately 29 million people around the world are now living with HIV and the epidemic shows no signs of abating. HIV/AIDS is supposed to have first appeared in Africa in the late 1950s and is thought to have moved to North America in the late 1960s. It has now been established that HIV originated from a virus infecting chimpanzees, the so-called simian immunodeficiency virus. This virus is believed to have crossed over to humans in the last century. It was first reported in the US on June 5th 1981 in Los Angeles. Since then, AIDS has become a global disease which, contrary to popular belief, does not discriminate by gender, sexual orientation, color of skin or wallet content.

Africa is without a doubt the region that is the most affected by AIDS today. In 2005 alone, 2 million out of the 2 800 000 deaths linked to AIDS were in Africa. The continent's ability to combat the disease is severely hampered by a myriad of complications. Civil wars, lack of financial resources, inadequate medical infrastructure and prevention campaigns, women's social status, social stigma, poverty and corruption prevent the population from getting proper information and the care that would help slow the epidemic. The most promising prevention method that has been discovered for AIDS is, oddly enough, a practice that has existed for thousands of years; circumcision. The World Health Organization has proved that circumcision reduces the risk of transmission from female to male by nearly 50%. Unfortunately, this measure is difficult to put into action in some countries because of religious beliefs and cultural values.

By Anne Cohen, Student, Montreal, Quebec





While the AIDS epidemic in Africa is obviously a serious healthcare problem, it uncovers social and economical problems which are just as dramatic. The demographic proportions of Africa are drastically shifting. In 35 African countries where the epidemic is severe, the average life expectancy is 48.3 years! The epidemic is causing the social fabric of African society to unravel. With the growing number of infected people comes a growing number of orphans with no one to take care of them and no place to go. These bereaved children most often have to depend on the care of their relatives, especially grandmothers. A growing number of grandmothers have had to go back to work in order to provide for their children's children, whose parents have died or are infected and unable to care for them. These grandmothers are attempting to give their grandchildren a normal and stable life, but most of these women are old and unable to provide for these children for long. The children most often end up in orphanages or fending for themselves on the street. The concept of family, key group in any social structure, is being redefined.

Given that HIV/AIDS infection is prevalent in young adults, it has a profound impact on the productive work force and reduces the employment rate in an economy that cannot afford to suffer. How can we end poverty in Africa if there are not enough healthy people to work and stimulate the economy? How can we ever expect African countries to be financially independent if they're too busy trying to keep their population alive to think about development? All the humanitarian aid that is being poured into Africa is insufficient, if not to say useless, without a solution to the AIDS epidemic.

AIDS is our disease. It is defining how a good portion of the world's population lives their everyday lives. In that sense alone it has become everybody's business. Every soul on this planet should feel concerned and propelled into action. But we aren't. The equivalent of the Brébeuf's CEGEP student body dies every week in South Africa alone and yet we go on with our lives as if nothing is wrong, as if millions of people aren't fading away. Why? Because they aren't right in front of us; because they don't have millions of dollars to spend on advertisements trying to sell us the latest trend. We, as a generation, have gone numb to the rest of the world around us. Sure, we take a look, have lot of meaningful thoughts, give some money here and there, but we have become immune to anything beyond what immediately concerns our comfort and well-being. In that sense we have regressed to the mentality of primitive tribes. Africa Is Dying Slowly people! When are we going to do something about it?