

Ignorance, denial threaten AIDS fight

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Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) was first recognized in 1981. It has killed 25 million people around the world so far, and new cases continue to occur.

There is no cure or vaccine for this disease, which is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), but we have very effective medicines that help turn it into a manageable chronic illness like diabetes.

One of the biggest barriers to preventing new HIV infections is ignorance and outright denial of the facts.

House of Numbers, which will be shown this week at the Nashville Film Festival, raises these issues. Sadly, the film has gotten its "numbers" wrong and questions whether HIV causes AIDS. This assertion is incorrect and potentially dangerous.

Here are the facts that we, as members and supporters of the scientific community, accept as true:

- HIV is a natural virus that entered the human population from chimpanzees many years ago.
- AIDS follows HIV infection at different times in different people, but it does not occur in the absence of HIV infection.
- HIV diagnostic tests are highly accurate and reliable.
- HIV eventually will kill in nearly every case, unless the infection is treated.
- Anti-HIV medicines dramatically prolong the lives of those who have access to them.
- Good nutrition and avoidance of substance abuse are important for general health and well-being and may help anti-HIV medicines work better, but they are not sufficient, by themselves, to prevent or treat HIV infection.

Separate from all the objective, incontrovertible scientific evidence, each of us has personal experience that is compelling. People we knew well who were well-nourished, healthy and not using recreational drugs got HIV, got sick and died.

After effective medicines were available, people with HIV began to live more normal lives. Seeing patients, clients and colleagues go from actively dying to general good health in a matter

of weeks is the most convincing evidence that HIV causes AIDS, and that stopping the virus can prevent or reverse AIDS.

The potential danger of "AIDS denialism" is that it may encourage people at risk of HIV infection to refuse to be tested, to ignore a diagnosis of HIV or to reject treatments that could prolong their lives. Denialism is especially cruel to people in resource-poor countries. They are hardest-hit by AIDS and have the least access to treatment.

Thanks to collaboration among researchers, physicians, social-service professionals and those they serve, HIV-positive Tennesseans live longer, happier, more productive lives. We need to continue this progress by emphasizing HIV prevention, testing and access to care for those who become infected.

For accurate information about AIDS and the dangers of AIDS denial, go to www.aidstruth.org, a site created by HIV/AIDS experts in the United States and South Africa.

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