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Introduction

Those who lived through the 1980s AIDS/HIV breakout epidemic mention how a diagnosis often meant a long and lonely death sentence. Many people during this time lacked the proper resources and education to handle the breakout of a new disease, leading many to leave their loved ones uncared for as they did not want to associate themselves with the shame that came with a rising so-called gay disease. Growing up around members of the LGBTQ community, the threat of HIV/AIDS has been a constant presence, often looming as an unspoken concern. This unaddressed topic ignited my interest in delving into the historical stigma of HIV/AIDS and how it endures and manifests in society today. Although we now have research and readily available treatment options, there is still a strong fear and societal misconception when it comes to HIV/AIDS. I was intrigued by the paradox of how a virus that has been extensively studied with readily available treatments continues to be stigmatized. How does the historical stigma of HIV/AIDS from the 1980s persist and manifest today, and what are the key factors contributing to its continued presence despite advancements in medical knowledge and treatment options?

Through my research, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how these factors continue to persist and affect individuals 40 years later as well as identify potential strategies to combat the enduring stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. I expect to find evidence that the historical stigma associated with the breakout epidemic in the 1980s has left a lasting imprint on societal perceptions and attitudes. I hypothesize that factors contributing to the persistence of this stigma may include lingering misconceptions, fear, and discrimination against the LGBTQ community rooted in the early years of the epidemic. Additionally, I anticipate that factors such as a lack of awareness and education may play significant roles in perpetuating AIDS stigma.

Citation #1

Gareth Thomas, “*How to tackle the stigma of living with HIV*”, *TED*, September 2022,

https://www.ted.com/talks/gareth_thomas_how_to_tackle_the_stigma_of_living_with_hiv/transcript?language=en

Summary

This TED Talk is a personal account of the impact of HIV stigma and the speaker's journey to combat it. It underlines how misconceptions about HIV persist, leading to discrimination and a lack of awareness. Gareth Thomas' experiences of encountering stigma in various aspects of life, from social settings to healthcare, shed light on the daily challenges faced by individuals living with HIV. Thomas highlights how HIV was initially perceived in the 1980s as a death sentence and wrongly associated with the gay community. These misconceptions and myths about HIV continue to this day, resulting in low awareness and understanding of the disease. Thomas, who lives with HIV, shares personal experiences of facing stigma, such as people avoiding physical contact and the general fear surrounding the virus. The talk emphasizes that anyone regardless of sexuality can contract HIV, and to combat the spread of the virus,

individuals must get tested. Stigma is a significant barrier to those seeking testing and early treatment, contributing to the ongoing epidemic. As a professional rugby athlete, Thomas discusses his journey in addressing the stigma and the need for collective efforts, education, and advocacy to tackle this issue. The emphasis on demonstrating that HIV is not a barrier to leading a fulfilling life and that with effective medication, it can become undetectable and untransmittable is a message of hope. The talk also touches upon legal inequalities and discrimination faced by people living with HIV and calls for the normalization of discussions about stigmatized conditions, including HIV.

Reflection

The call to action to challenge stigma and discrimination is a powerful message. It emphasizes the need for education, advocacy, and open conversations to dispel myths and encourage understanding. Gareth Thomas' involvement in the Tackle HIV campaign and their use of science, advocacy, and sports to change attitudes is a commendable effort in the fight against stigma. As a TED Talk, this information presents itself as an open-ended video presentation that allows viewers to connect with the speaker on a deeper level. Overall, this TED Talk serves as a reminder that stigma and discrimination still surround HIV, and it is a collective responsibility to challenge and change these attitudes. It calls on individuals to play their part in combating stigma, whether at home, with friends, or in the broader community and emphasizes that ending HIV forever is an achievable goal through collective efforts.

Quotation

“It took me a long while to process it at first, because I'd gone from a man who had won every trophy that he had ever dreamt of to someone who, all of a sudden, was living a lie, who

was ashamed, embarrassed, isolated, afraid I was going to die, afraid to tell anyone, afraid to tell my family, afraid I was going to lose everything and everyone that I'd worked so hard for and I loved so much. I was afraid that from now on, I would be defined by a virus.” (Gareth Thomas, TED)

Citation #2

Kontomanolis, Emmanuel N., et al. "The social stigma of HIV-AIDS: society's role." *HIV/AIDS - Research and Palliative Care*, vol. 9, annual 2017, pp. 111+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A531759445/AONE?u=cuny_nytc&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=ad786900.

Summary

The article discusses the challenges faced by HIV-positive pregnant women, who not only grapple with the physical and emotional toll of the disease but also with societal discrimination and stigma. Stigmatization of HIV-positive individuals is a pervasive issue, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, and psychological distress. The stigma surrounding HIV stems from misconceptions and a lack of understanding about the disease, making individuals feel responsible for their condition. Access to healthcare for those with lower income or otherwise can also be hindered by the fear of infection. To combat this stigma, the article suggests mass-media interventions and educational campaigns that promote understanding and address misconceptions. It emphasizes the importance of introducing HIV testing for pregnant women and the need for society, healthcare professionals, and governments to work together to eliminate stigma and provide essential support and education.

Reflection

This article sheds light on the challenges faced by HIV-positive pregnant women and the enduring stigma that surrounds the disease. It serves as a reminder of the critical importance of addressing social discrimination, promoting education, and increasing awareness about HIV. Stigmatization not only affects the mental health of those living with HIV but also has consequences on their access to healthcare and overall quality of life. Moreover, the call for mandatory HIV testing for pregnant women highlights the urgency of identifying and addressing HIV in the context of maternal health. The article emphasizes the role of social media and educational programs in combating these misconceptions and promoting understanding. It becomes evident that there is a shared responsibility for society, healthcare professionals, and governments to work collectively in eliminating HIV stigma. This involves dispelling myths and misunderstandings and providing crucial support and resources to those affected by the disease.

In the pursuit of a more compassionate and inclusive society, we must continue to challenge and change the social norms that perpetuate discrimination against HIV-positive individuals, especially pregnant women. As society continues to progress, it is essential to prioritize education and understanding to ensure that all individuals can gain easy access to healthcare and proper resources.

Quotation

“Lack of a clearly defined approach of stigma prevents experienced personnel from introducing efficient treatment programs and new initiatives with the final aim of annihilating discrimination. The stigma carries the inherent identity of dividing people into groups.” (Dove Medical Press Limited)

Citation #3

Rzeszutek, Marcin, and Ewa Gruszczyńska. “*Depression during the COVID-19 pandemic among people living with HIV: Are low HIV/AIDS stigma and high perceived emotional support protective resources?*”, *Wiley Online Library*, 4 Oct. 2023, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/smi.3231.

Summary

This study investigates how depressive symptoms changed among 392 people with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), the research identifies four trajectories of depression: stable high, stable very low, stable low, and increasing. Despite no overall increase in symptoms, 57.6% of the participants were likely diagnosed with depression. The study identified four patterns of depression trajectories, challenging the idea of a universal impact. Sociodemographic and clinical factors, such as gender, relationship status, CD4 counts, and substance use disorder history, are incorporated into the analysis, revealing that HIV/AIDS stigma and perceived emotional support (PES) are significant factors. The study concludes neither stigma nor perceived emotional support protected those vulnerable to increased depression and HIV/AIDS.

Reflection

This study stands out for its use of scales, graphs, and thorough research backed by science. The empirical evidence, including the identification of trajectories using the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), and statistical modeling adds weight and academic credibility to its findings. The study shows that 57.6% were likely to be diagnosed with depression despite an overall lack of increased symptoms and goes in-depth on unknown pre-pandemic depression levels, challenging assumptions about what factors influence mental health in this context. It underscores the need for more fixed interventions, considering the unique

challenges faced by the HIV/AIDS crisis. This study provides concrete evidence that calls for the necessity of a more nuanced and academic approach to mental health support for individuals living with HIV/AIDS during global crises.

Quotation

“The COVID-19 case showed that pandemics do not occur within a social vacuum but instead reveal preexisting inequalities and disparities in terms of access to socioeconomic resources.” (Cabin, 2021)

Conclusion

Exploring the historical stigma of HIV/AIDS from the 1980s and its implications on today's society reveals the persistent challenges faced by individuals living with HIV/AIDS. The horror and fear that surrounds the HIV/AIDS crisis rooted in the past continues to affect societal attitudes and perceptions, impacting the lives of those affected by HIV/AIDS. Throughout my research, several key findings emerged that shed light on the complex issue of why this stigma endures, despite significant advances in medical knowledge and treatment options. I discovered that the historical legacy of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s has left a deep and enduring mark on perceived emotional support and attitudes. Lingering misconceptions, fear, and discrimination that originated during that time continue to shape how people view HIV/AIDS today. Beyond just the historical legacy, factors such as lack of awareness, cultural biases, and social inequality all play significant roles. The study on depressive symptoms among people with HIV/AIDS during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided insight into the multifaceted nature of mental health within this population. Despite advancements in medical knowledge and treatment options, HIV/AIDS is rooted in historical stigma that continues to influence societal perceptions and attitudes. The factors that create a barrier to eradicating stigma affect those who are scared to

seek treatment or educate themselves on prevention. Although the outcome of my research did not surprise me, I was surprised to learn how strong and persistent the extent to which these historical stigmas continue to influence public opinion.

What I learned is crucial because it highlights the urgent need for targeted education and advocacy to dispel myths and prejudices that continue to surround HIV/AIDS. This research is particularly important for healthcare professionals, policymakers, and advocacy organizations who must work collectively to challenge and change the attitudes that perpetuate stigma. Additionally, it is vital for individuals in the public, as they are often the first line of defense against stigma in their daily interactions. By understanding the deep-rooted nature of HIV/AIDS stigma and its consequences, we can take meaningful steps toward a more compassionate and informed society.