

# Don't Stigmatize Me, or Anyone Else

In a statement from the Government of Sweden to attendees of the *XVII International AIDS Conference* in Mexico City, August 3-8, 2008, and to the world, we are told, "Our efforts to halt and reverse the spread of HIV and AIDS must be based on the principles of human rights and gender equality. The respect for, and full enjoyment of, human rights by all people must be the foundation of our response to the pandemic'... 'The full respect for all human rights, including the right not to be subject to stigma and discrimination, is critical." We need "Universal Action Now."

Who would ever have guessed that an organization would want to fund an anti-stigma campaign around HIV/AIDS in Western North Carolina? Well, our region is getting this message by way of the *I Need U2 Know* campaign.

Why can't we, as a community, eliminate the stigma that was first placed on HIV infected people in the 1980s? What allows us to ignore the beauty and humanity of all people; to stigmatize anyone? I just don't get it.

As recently as April 28, 2009, and apropos our regional effort, Rakesh Singh ([rsingh@kff.org](mailto:rsingh@kff.org)) of the Kaiser Family Foundation ([www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org)), sent out results of a KFF survey in a news release entitled, "Some Signs of Progress, But Misconceptions And Stigma Remain." Below are excerpts:

"[The] survey indicates some signs that HIV/AIDS in the U.S. may carry less stigma than in the past. For instance, there has been a slow and steady increase since the late 1990s in the share of people who say they would be very comfortable with a coworker who has HIV/AIDS (44% now, up from 32% in 1997). However, stigmatizing attitudes towards people with HIV have not gone away; fully half (51%) of the public says they would be uncomfortable having their food prepared by someone who is HIV positive."

Would you be uncomfortable having your food prepared by someone who is HIV positive? Not I. However, I am a vegetarian, so fix me something without meat and I'll really enjoy it. Have a dessert as an appetizer, and I am all yours.

More from the survey results: "Misconceptions may be a factor in stigma, and several remain when it comes to correct information about HIV transmission. One-third (34%) of Americans incorrectly believe or are unsure whether HIV can be transmitted by one of the following actions: sharing a drinking glass (27%), touching a toilet seat (17%), or swimming in a pool with an HIV positive person (14%)."

Amazing to me – 29 years into this epidemic – but, as a harm reductionist, I must meet people where they are, and try my best to educate them about irrational fears. Have pool and bathing suit – will swim. Have HIV – jump in! Just watch out for too much sun if your medications increase your risk of a burn. Suntan lotion and shade are great for all of us.

Here is an opportunity to write to your legislators asking that we put more effort and financial resources into prevention messages. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our President and First Lady would speak to us – at least weekly – about public health issues? I mean really talk to us intelligently, and honestly. Give us the facts.

Start off by educating the country about the most pressing diseases affecting our communities. Encourage us to be knowledgeable, instead of dumbing-down our next generations. Tell us to take the stigma out of our communities, and instead replace that energy with positive images and goals.

So many people, maybe some closer to you than you think, are living today with HIV and the antiquated stigma of two decades ago. We know so much more now about HIV than we did in the early days. Fear not! Enjoy life, and don't miss an opportunity to meet anyone that comes along your path in life, especially someone with HIV. Some of the greatest people I have ever known, loved, worked with, shared a meal with, and cared for have had HIV/AIDS. You don't know what you are missing, if you are missing those opportunities.

Peace,

**Michael J. Harney Jr.**

Western North Carolina AIDS Project

Educator