
Commentary

Preventing AIDS: Self-Interest and Public Spirit

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The lawsuit brought against Rock Hudson's estate by Marc Christian, Hudson's former lover, illustrates a key issue related to AIDS: the role of public spirit in the prevention of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection. Christian brought the suit because Hudson deceived him, failing to warn Christian that he had AIDS, so that their sexual relationship might continue. The problem is larger than the tale of two people, and lawsuits are not the answer.

Slowing the spread of HIV infection will require changes in people's sexual behavior. Condom use and reductions in high-risk behavior will help to achieve this end. In the past, public health efforts aimed at other sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis and gonorrhea, have been only minimally effective in altering people's sexual behavior.

What strategies ought to be used to encourage behavior change?

Human behavior is typically described in the language of self-interest and incentives, drawn from economic models of the marketplace. Public education programs have assumed that people will change their behavior if they have the right incentives and information. Insurance underwriters encourage people to think in terms of their own interests, by setting premiums on actuarial risk. Government, too, encourages self-interested behavior by promoting HIV testing, one outcome of which may be the labeling of HIV-infected persons, while opposing legislation that would protect infected people from discrimination.

But there are serious limitations to encouraging self-interested behavior as a means of preventing HIV transmission. People will not always take precautions against infection when making calculations based on self-interest. Many may discount their interest in long-term well-being in favor of their interest in immediate gratification. They may also prefer the certainty of immediate pleasure over less tangible future risks (even death). This human tendency is illustrated by the actions of drivers who drink and drug users.

Furthermore, people who are infected with the AIDS virus have little self-interest in taking precautions necessary to avoid spreading the virus to others. Criminal law or damage awards like those made to Marc Christian are unlikely to be strong inducements to behavior change, given the strong likelihood of early death among infected persons.

Another limitation of the self-interest model is that it ignores that people's behavior varies with the context in

which it occurs and the norms of what is appropriate in each sphere. The same persons may be driven by economic motivation in the marketplace, by civic ideals in public affairs, and by altruism or a sense of community among friends and loved ones.

An AIDS prevention strategy based on the promotion of self-interested behavior will be only partially effective because sexual behavior is not governed by self-interest alone.

It is true that sex is a private activity that initially appears unrelated to civic behavior. Moreover, people do engage in sexual activity for their own gratification, sometimes with little concern for others: witness the sex industry and the literature of sexual domination, exploitation, and betrayal.

But sex is often an expression of intimacy and affection, attitudes that are accompanied by caring and respect for others. These feelings can evoke generosity and altruism. Furthermore, sexual activity today has a public aspect. Discussions of sexual behavior and AIDS have entered the schools and the news media. Both private action and public norms reflect and influence public-spirited behavior in the realm of sex. Policy that relies on self-interested behavior alone will fail to tap these powerful motivations.

A prevention policy should include a place for public spirit and recognize that people sometimes do for others what they will not do for themselves. Public spirit is often heightened in times of adversity such as war. It is easy to remain self-interested when all is well, but crisis evokes a sense of public responsibility even in the complacent. AIDS is a crisis that has the potential to bring out civic virtue.

However, public spirit is sensitive to the surrounding environment. It must be nourished and encouraged. The great moral leaders have always taught by their own example. As Justice Brandeis stated in his dissent in *Olmstead v. United States*, "Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it teaches the whole people by its example."

Antidiscrimination laws, adequate financing of medical and social services for people with AIDS, and the socially responsible regulation of medical and life insurance are but a few of the ways in which government can set an example of decent, civic-minded behavior. The public should evaluate government AIDS policy not only on the basis of its short-run financial cost or efficiency, but also in terms of how good an example of public-spirited behavior it sets.