

AIDS Lecture January 8, 1989
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Address
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It had been 27 days since I last addressed a public audience on the AIDS epidemic.

This was a meeting of a number of societies that had an interest in occupational health in general, and about AIDS, on this occasion, in particular. I started by encouraging them to make the most of their opportunity together to talk with one another, teach one another, and learn from one another. The specific subject was AIDS and health workers, and therefore appropriate that I should be addressing this group, and even more appropriate that they should be listening to what I had to say. So, my specific focus would be on the needs of the health work force in reference to the AIDS epidemic, but I wanted to apply the specific focus within the context of a better, healthier life for our workforce in general. Perhaps it was brash of me to say that I have to say that I would be much more convinced about an employer's concern with the threat of AIDS if that employer was also concerned about employees who were under stress, who smoke or take drugs, who drink too much, or who are overweight. I added that I would be impressed if the cafeteria sold nutritious food at a reasonable cost, and especially if employer's concern about AIDS was accompanied by a commitment to having employment opportunities open to everyone, regardless of race, age, sex, or national or ethnic origin. I would be very impressed if the concern was that all workers received equal pay for equal work.

To state it another way, the AIDS epidemic is serious and deadly, and it should be taken very seriously as a threat to employees, but one measure of an employers ability to be serious about AIDS is simply the way his institution relates to employees in general.

I then talked about why the AIDS epidemic was frightening, and after explaining a little bit about its epidemiology and spread, made a plea that our basic weapon against AIDS, education, is directed right at high risk patterns of behavior, and right at the people who practice those behaviors so they will change. But, said I, "education is not condemnation, it's not hate, and it's not fear." We must not attack whole groups of people because some among them may be practicing high-risk behavior.

As employers, I asked the audience to be compassionate, fair-minded citizens, not to use irrational fear of AIDS as a shield behind which to violate the ethics of the American workplace. After all the years we have tried to establish fairness in our work environments, we cannot allow the AIDS virus to infect and destroy that aspect of the American way.

Obviously, I did not hammer away at how safe the workplace was, in reference to AIDS, but rather took the path that the workplace has to be safe about everything, and if it is, it will be safe about AIDS as well.