

A Librarian's Guide to

STD Awareness

ANTHONY AYCOCK

April 24, 1980. San Francisco. Ken Horne, a gay man, died of an unknown illness. According to some sources, that illness was Kaposi sarcoma, a cancer that usually causes tumors to appear on the skin or inside the mouth, although they can also develop in other parts of the body, such as in the lymph nodes, lungs, or digestive tract. Other sources claim Horne was infected with *Cryptococcus neoformans*, a fungus that can be found just about everywhere in the world.

Kaposi sarcoma and *Cryptococcus neoformans* have one thing in common: They aren't a problem for most people. Those who struggle tend to have weakened immune systems, most likely caused by "advanced HIV/AIDS."¹ Kaposi sarcoma, in fact, is considered an AIDS-defining illness. This means that when it occurs in someone infected with HIV, that person officially has AIDS.² The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) made this diagnosis of Ken Horne in 1981, a year after his death. He thus left the footnotes of history and entered the main text as the first person to be diagnosed with AIDS, the worst public health menace of the 20th century.

Not long after, the first article to mention the new disease appeared in a gay

newspaper, *The New York Native*. Dr. Lawrence Mass, who wrote a regular health column for the small weekly, had heard rumors of a host of illnesses striking gay men in New York City. In some, it was Kaposi sarcoma, which was thought to affect only elderly people living in the Middle East or Eastern Europe. Others seemed to have a rare form of pneumonia typically appearing in people with se-

verely suppressed immune systems, such as chemotherapy patients and transplant recipients. After first denying that these cases had a common cause, the CDC admitted that there was a link. Mass broke the news in July 1981 with a piece on the then-new HIV/AIDS epidemic called "Cancer in the Gay Community."³

April has historically been STD Awareness Month, a CDC initiative meant to

LINKS TO THE SOURCE

SCIENCE/HEALTH

CDC's Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)
cdc.gov/std/default.htm

HIV.gov
hiv.gov

HIV.gov's Coronavirus (COVID-19) and People with HIV
hiv.gov/hiv-basics/staying-in-hiv-care/other-related-health-issues/coronavirus-covid-19

American Sexual Health Association (ASHA)
ashasexualhealth.org

National Coalition for Sexual Health
nationalcoalitionforsexualhealth.org

Guttmacher Institute
guttmacher.org

Guttmacher Institute's Sex and HIV Education
guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education

The screenshot shows the HIV.gov website. At the top, there are navigation links for HIV BASICS, FEDERAL RESPONSE, EVENTS, BLOG, and a search icon. Below the navigation is a search bar with the text "GET TESTED, FIND SERVICES + PEP" and a placeholder "Enter City, State or ZIP Code". The main content area features a large banner with the text "FIND FEDERAL HIV RESOURCES ON COVID-19" and a link "HIV.gov/coronavirus". To the right of the banner is a "POPULAR HIV BASICS" section with several articles, including "Symptoms of HIV", "What Are HIV and AIDS?", "How to Stay 'Transmission'", and "U.S. Statistics".

"raise awareness about what STDs are and how they impact our lives; and understand why it's important to prevent, test for, and treat STDs."⁴ It's a worthy goal. One in five people in the U.S. have an STD. In 2018, there were 26 million new infections, half of those among young people (ages 15–24). These infections totaled \$16 billion in direct medical costs.⁵

In recognition of the 40th anniversary of the first AIDS diagnosis, as well as the urgency of reversing the spread of STDs—or, as they're sometimes called, STIs (sexually transmitted infections)—this article will discuss the best sources of medical, historical, and cultural information on sexual wellness.

SCIENCE/HEALTH

AIDS has been around for 40 years—the equivalent of two generations. Other afflictions have longer histories: Syphilis, for instance, is recorded as far back as the 15th century.⁶ We've had a long time to get to know these maladies. And yet, misinformation about them abounds. Here are some of the best websites for medical information on STDs.

CDC's Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

The CDC's Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) site is a one-stop shop for STD knowledge. It covers major diseases—AIDS, herpes, hepatitis—as well as lesser-known ones—chancroid, scabies, lymphogranuloma venereum. The section Gay, Bisexual, & Other MSM (men

who have sex with men) is an important addition to a thinly researched area. And whether you're a doctor, patient, or concerned citizen, you'll find something fascinating in the Training section.

HIV.gov

HIV.gov provides an in-depth look at the causes of HIV, its symptoms, its treatment, and best of all, what the U.S. is doing to battle the epidemic. The Events section links to conferences and webinars keyed to a host of observances, such as National HIV Testing Day and World AIDS Day. Most immediately useful may be the resources under Coronavirus (COVID-19) and People with HIV.

One in five people in the U.S. have an STD.

American Sexual Health Association (ASHA)

The American Sexual Health Association (ASHA) takes a broader approach, focusing not just on STDs but on overall sexual health. This includes issues such as consent, reproductive health, contraception, relationship types, and communication. Make sure to check out the podcast Sex+Health (click on Podcast in the Resources section), which features interviews with medical professionals and experts in the field of sexuality.

NOTES

1. tinyurl.com/4ssr9pea
2. tinyurl.com/6mlex6jg
3. tinyurl.com/5i8qvvl3
4. cdc.gov/std/sam/STD-Awareness-MonthToolkit.pdf
5. cdc.gov/std/statistics/prevalence-incidence-cost-2020.htm
6. tinyurl.com/17y9s48n

National Coalition for Sexual Health

The National Coalition for Sexual Health is another holistic site, with information for medical providers as well as the public. It is full of downloadable guides such as Five Action Steps to Good Sexual Health. Of particular interest is the Media Center (click on the Media section), which links to news articles about sexual health. The oldest articles are from 2015—a robust archive!

Guttmacher Institute

The Guttmacher Institute is "a leading research and policy organization committed to advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights in the United States and globally," according to its About page, giving this site a more academic flair than most. It has lots of articles, studies, and policy analyses. Be prepared to learn some depressing things; the Sex and HIV Education section says that only 17 states require that HIV information presented in schools be "medically accurate."

HISTORY/CULTURE

Where did STDs come from? How have they changed us? How have we responded? What is their impact on politics? Law? Art? These sites examine STDs from a historical or cultural perspective.

NIH's In Their Own Words...

In Their Own Words... from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), offers the internet's most detailed history of the AIDS epidemic, with historical documents, images, and transcripts of



interviews with more than 30 medical professionals, including Anthony Fauci—director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and chief medical advisor to President Joe Biden—who got his start as an HIV researcher in the 1980s.

Venereal Disease Visual History Archive

“Venereal disease” is an outdated term, a relic of the early 20th century. It’s appropriate, then, that the phrase is in the title of the Venereal Disease Visual History Archive, a collection of 1930s and 1940s posters, infographics, films, and other visuals that were part of that era’s nationwide campaign to “stamp out” STDs. (My favorite is a 1944 map showing which states required premarital syphilis tests.)

Nolo’s Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and Lawsuits

Can the intentional or negligent transmission of an STD lead to a personal injury lawsuit? That is one of the questions the site Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and Lawsuits, by the popular legal publisher Nolo, seeks to answer. Nolo’s discussion is general, although it does link to every state’s law on the subject, so you can educate yourself. (In my state, North Carolina, “people who know that they are infected with HIV/AIDS can be convicted of a crime if they fail to use

condoms or inform their sex partners of their infections.” Good to know!)

The STI Project

What happens when you cross *Cosmo*, *GQ*, and MasterClass with STD awareness? You get The STI Project, an education and advocacy initiative whose mission is to eradicate the stigma surrounding sexual diseases. There are booklists, fact sheets, reference guides, hotlines, a blog—and, yes, an 8-week, \$800 MasterClass. (The economical alternative is a \$167 1-hour consultation with the site’s founder, Jenelle Marie Pierce, featured under STI Services.)

AskMen’s The Ultimate Guide to Dating With STDs

“Everyone deserves to have a safe, healthy and pleasurable sex life,” says AskMen’s The Ultimate Guide to Dating With STDs resource—even people with STDs. To that end, the site discusses when and how to tell a partner you have a disease and how to handle other awkward aspects of such relationships. And have

Anthony Aycocck is the author of *The Accidental Law Librarian* (Information Today, Inc., 2013). He is the director of the North Carolina Legislative Library and an assistant editor for Convention Scene (conventionscene.com). He has a B.A. in English, an M.F.A. in creative writing, an M.L.I.S., and an M.A. in criminal justice. Send your comments about this article to itletters@infotoday.com or tweet us (@ITINewsBreaks).

LINKS TO THE SOURCE

HISTORY/CULTURE

NIH’s In Their Own Words...
history.nih.gov/display/history/In+Their+Own+Words

**Venereal Disease
Visual History Archive**
vdarchive.newmedialab.cuny.edu

**Nolo’s Sexually Transmitted
Diseases (STDs) and Lawsuits**
tinyurl.com/17rd78os

The STI Project
thestiproject.com

The STI Project’s STI Services
thestiproject.com/std-project-about/the-std-projects-services

**AskMen’s The Ultimate
Guide to Dating With STDs**
tinyurl.com/11lg24pl

**Verywell Health’s 10
Best Films About HIV**
tinyurl.com/1lsmar48

you ever thought, “There should be a Tinder for people with STDs”? Well, there is!

Verywell Health’s 10 Best Films About HIV

The internet loves lists, and there are lots like Verywell Health’s 10 Best Films About HIV, each with its own agenda. This list is a balanced one, with films that are old and new, gay and straight, funny and sad. Some of the older ones don’t hold up well, but that is why they should still be viewed. You can’t appreciate the progress STD awareness has made without remembering its fearful, closed-minded, oppressive origins.