
“Belief is more powerful than the truth”
– Socrates

Further to Dr. Donovan’s article on AIDS, I remember my own submission to the CJPH in 1990 entitled, “The Psychopolitics of AIDS.” In this and a companion paper by Eric Mintz, we reviewed the evidence and accurately predicted the AIDS epidemic in Canada; that it would soon peak, then slowly taper off. At the time, we acknowledged that a surge in HIV infections among IVDU could significantly alter our prediction. The thesis for our papers was that, unlike in Africa, there was no likelihood of a significant heterosexual spread of HIV in Canada, acknowledging a minor male-to-female spread and an almost non-existent female-to-male spread. HIV just did not spread efficiently as a result of vaginal sex (in North America) and this would limit the scale of our epidemic. A major heterosexual spread would be required for the epidemic to reach levels that would match the frightening predictions (remember them?). We identified the many references that supported our view.

Our concern was for the ultimate credibility of the education message that was common in 1990 and still persists today, a message that stresses heterosexual spread from unprotected sexual intercourse and fails to adequately emphasize high-risk sexual practices, particularly anal intercourse. We were worried that youth would unfortunately tune out and that public health would lose credibility. The message was valid but the reasons were not. There were a lot of interests that favoured this heterosexual emphasis, including political ones; worries about the loss of political support for research funding should AIDS be viewed primarily as a disease of gays and of drug abusers, the religious agenda that promoted abstinence, and the gay concern that AIDS not be viewed as a predominantly homosexual disease.

Our papers were rejected because, in the words of the then CJPH editor, “you are wrong, you know.” I pleaded for a corner of the Journal where contributors could make fools of themselves. Our views were not mainstream. I do not believe our papers were circulated for peer review, which brings us back to Socrates’ words.

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