

why we need vaccine activism, still

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In November 1995 I wrote an article called “Why We Need Vaccine Activism,” which became a mainstay reference for the AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition when it was founded the next month. With this new, more international edition of the *AIDS Vaccine Handbook* nine years later, it seemed time to re-address this question and think about why we still really need activism and what form it should take in the times to come.

WELL, there’s still no vaccine, for one thing, right? So a number of the arguments I made in 1995, when the AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition was just being started, about the need for an AIDS vaccine and AIDS vaccine activism still apply.

If you’re reading this book, chances are you’re already somewhat sympathetic to the notion that even a partially effective vaccine would be an excellent addition to the arsenal of weapons against this amazingly tenacious *virus*.

In the meantime, some of the other activism needs described then have been at least partially addressed:

- › There are now a small but critical number of reasonably well-funded organizations focused on AIDS vaccines, most with public or community input.
- › Funding has increased several-fold for academic research, product development and *clinical trials*.
- › Public and foundation support has also kick-started industry to become more involved.

- › A variety of vaccine concepts are waiting to be tested, all with the aim of inducing cellular *immune responses* that will blunt infection.
- › Many more countries and international organizations are joining in the effort to advocate for, develop and test AIDS vaccines, with particular emphasis on the developing world.

Yet, for better or worse, my conclusion then applies just as well today: “We now believe that it will take a series of candidate vaccines being tested, going well into the 21st century, to develop a truly effective vaccine. Widespread support for this effort would focus attention on the process and could shorten it. We need to be prepared to support this long-haul effort, while looking out for the interests of our communities and ourselves.”

To be somewhat more radical today, here's what makes vaccine activism just as important as ever:

- › The worst of the disease remains imperfectly confined to groups of people who are least equipped to manage it: the poor, the disenfranchised, and the stigmatized. So the world can go about its business as if things weren't really as bad as they are, or will become. Those with money and insurance can get treated and live tolerably well, while everyone else is hoping (and sometimes fighting) for treatment or waiting for death. It's an ugly picture of the human condition; much of the world is a death trap.
- › Anyone who's sexually active, particularly youth, lives with the nightmare of AIDS the way earlier generations lived in fear of nuclear war. HIV colors and even governs the way we grow up, make love, partner, and die. What a dream it would be to get it under control!
- › The future of the planet will be determined by the course of the HIV pandemic as much as by the fate of the environment, global warming, and economic globalization. Whole societies, whole sub-continents are already being affected in immensely destructive ways.

Against a time bomb ticking away, we have science scratching its head, reorganizing itself, contesting turf and how to proceed. This still sounds like a case for activism to me.

The sad truth is that there are still only a few hundred people, mostly people who have a direct problem with AIDS, or specialized scientists, advocates and trial volunteers committing their energies to the quest for a preventive vaccine. The rest of the AIDS-ridden world still needs to be talked or argued or shaken out of its torpor by those of us who “get it.” Got it?

FORTUNATELY the AIDS vaccine agenda is increasingly part of some larger agenda: alleviating poverty and promoting development and economic growth; global health, emerging diseases and health care; social equity, women, children, minorities; AIDS prevention; human rights; bioterror, war and peace. The trick in the years to come will be to make alliances with these movements and—to borrow the cliché—to keep our eyes on the prize.

The science is undeniably hard, and the road will be long. In fact, the completion of two *efficacy* trials in 2003 and the launch of another have reminded us *how* hard and *how* long. Activism is needed and it makes a difference, so hang in there.

There are places to go (for information), people to meet, and things to do everywhere in the world, at every level and with any skills. Many possibilities can be found in this book, but also look around you. The AIDS vaccine effort is newly global and ready to grow.

Welcome to the 21st century, dubbed by many to be the century of biology. Our century.

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