

Creating a Safe Social Environment for HIV Prevention, Treatment and Care in Dominica

by

[Dr. Clemon George](#)

As Canadians, we benefit from State of the Art health care, but we know that this is not a reality for most Dominicans living in Dominica. It is through your ongoing support whether through remittances to Dominica, the barrel economy, direct or indirect assistance to the Princess Margaret Hospital that you show care in improving the health of Dominicans.

Dominica is resource poor. However there is something special about Dominicans that make us resilient to the many adversities that life throws our way. It is the way that we care for each other, our compassion, our sense of family and community that make us successful in other endeavours.

Ladies and Gentlemen, today, I want to address you on a topic that is very important for Dominicans and by extension, peoples of the Caribbean, but also very fitting for us here in Ontario. This is about HIV and AIDS that is affecting our families and communities. I am banking on your compassion, on your goodwill, support and sense of caring to help in changing the course of the epidemic.

Many of you may not have been at the International AIDS conference which was held in Toronto just last month, to hear of the human burden of HIV in Africa, the Caribbean and other parts of the world. There has been some progress in treating HIV but the challenges that lay ahead of us are many. Today, I want to bring that talk home, to you as Ontarians and to you as Dominicans.

HIV is a serious illness for African and Caribbean peoples here in Ontario. The most recent HIV estimates for Ontario show that by the end of 2004 Caribbean and African people made up 14% of all people infected with HIV living in Ontario. In Toronto, they also accounted for 14% of all people infected with HIV, although Black people as a whole represent just 8% of Toronto's population.

The situation is also disturbing for Dominica. While there are no reliable statistical data for Dominica, the National HIV Prevention Program reports a cumulative total of 310 diagnosed HIV cases, with 4 new cases diagnosed between March and May of this year. It is also estimated that 115 people in Dominica are living with AIDS - that is 115 people are suffering from opportunistic infections such as tuberculosis or cervical cancer (for women) brought on by the HIV illness. Of those infected with HIV, the data shows a ratio of 3 men to 1 woman.

As you see, these figures indicate that HIV is a serious health issue among us both here in Ontario and in Dominica.

So, what's important in curbing the epidemic? There are two important ways of stopping the spread of HIV. In the first case we need to prevent it from happening and in the second case we need to provide care and support for those who are already infected with HIV.

Last month, I spoke to Julie Frampton, who is Dominica's National AIDS Coordinator, and asked her to name the two most important barriers for HIV prevention in Dominica. Surprisingly, her answer was similar to the information that we obtained from black people here in Ontario. The number one factor is described as Fear, Stigma and Discrimination. And the 2nd is lack of knowledge - knowing more about protection.

But, for this talk, I will focus my attention on the first factor. That is, HIV Fear, HIV Stigma and Discrimination.

At a personal level, most of us would have experienced the negative effects of Stigma. In the news, we often hear about the black gangs, the guns and violence - Blacks are described as drug pushers. We hear of the problem of "me baby have no father", the Welfare moms and so forth. Just last month, we read in one of Canada's National Newspaper, that Blacks are responsible for the HIV epidemic, that black people lack discipline and self-control. We work, we vote, we are good citizens but we are often relegated to an inferior status due most often to racism.

But think about it for a minute.

As you know, there are 3 main routes for the spread of HIV: through unprotected sex, due to intravenous drug use and from a mother to her child. But unprotected sex, the most important form of transmission for us is linked to moral and religious turpitude (that is some form of wrong doing). For men who have sex with men, we think of them as degenerate, we are quick to cast them out of society - to make them pariahs, lepers. We abominate them. For women, we are quick to think of them as having loose morals, as being dirty and evil.

But, why is it so hard for us to think of the oppression that we cast upon others when we are so quick to think of ourselves as an oppressed people? Why should we judge others with different yard measurements, when we fail to use those same measurements for our actions?

At the International AIDS Conference, Melinda Gates addressed this very issue of HIV Stigma. She talked about the scourge of Stigma in the far away country of India. But today, I will tell you about HIV Stigma in Dominica. Your cousins, your family, your people are being cast into the street because of HIV. There are even medical doctors who refuse to take care of those with HIV, not because they are afraid of

catching it, but because they believe that people with the disease have transgressed certain moral rules. I'm sure you are all familiar with the mourning process when we have lost someone. But, even after someone dies of HIV, church pews are empty because no one wants to go to that HIV person's funeral.

The superior moral values that we hold others too, are often a pretext for those who cloak their hatred under the guise of culture, of religion, or other values - values that have been handed down to us, that were used to keep us in the bonds of physical slavery and now keep us in psychological bondage.

Stigma is indeed cruel and irrational - affecting not only those with HIV but their love ones, their family and friends.

Stigma, prevents us from distributing condoms in our hospitals, to our children, to our friends. Stigma prevents people from making the right choices of taking antiretroviral drugs even though it is available, for worrying that their neighbours will find out about their illness.

Stigma prevents pregnant moms who are positive from taking a course of antiretrovirals that would otherwise prevent her from passing the virus to her baby. Stigma forces positive moms to breast feed when they know that to breast feed increases the chance of baby getting the virus.

Stigma prevents people from using condoms. Stigma results in us turning our backs on our people when they need us the most.

While abstinence is a virtue, it is an illogical concept. Look at the statistics for the number of teenage pregnancies occurring each year in our population both here in Toronto and in Dominica! For some people, abstinence until marriage to a partner of the opposite sex is not an option. Condom use does not lead to loose moral behaviours - people will continue to have sex and more people will die if we do not act progressively. Condoms save lives - those of our children, families and friends.

While there are people in Dominica and in Canada who are infected with HIV, and are benefiting from antiretroviral therapy, there are many more who need the drugs but are afraid to come forward for testing or for treatment, due to the Stigma attached to HIV. But life would be so different for those people who need the therapy but are unable to access it for fear of others knowing. We need to extend our compassion and to give less moralizing lectures or preaching. You can play your part too by opening your hearts and minds to these individuals.

People who are infected by HIV need more than sympathy: they need your compassion - which I know that you have, and action. Embrace those with HIV as you would have before you knew that they were infected. Show that you care by having open and frank discussions with your friends and families about sex and condom use. Move beyond moralizing peoples lives by accepting the realities of life. Stop the

stereotyping because we know that it does not lead to positive change - it only makes it harder for individuals to live healthy lives.

As residents of Ontario and Citizens of Canada, we are proud of this country for its human rights stance and its quickness in correcting wrongs of the past. But, remember that there were people before us who fought for those rights. Our liberty, our freedom are always being threatened and we must be vigilant to protect them.

As Dominicans too, we have an affinity and an allegiance to our country of birth. This is why we must encourage our friends, families, religious leaders and politicians back home to create and maintain that caring, nurturing environment. Let's move beyond our personal biases, our uncomfortable feelings with regards to the moralities of people's lives and press on to better the lives of those at risk or living with HIV and AIDS.

In closing, I want to tell you how proud I am to be here with you today, to see the many people who are all committed to bettering the lives of Dominicans in Dominica and also in keeping that camaraderie/that fraternity and friendship/ of united Dominicans.

Your donations go beyond patients at the Princess Margaret Hospital to reach all parts of Dominica. In a similar way, your non-judgmental support for those with HIV will go beyond the disease and help to build communities.

So, let's continue to keep Dominica in our hearts as we move forward in creating a better social environment for those in Dominica and Canada living with HIV or AIDS.

I thank you!

Clemon George, Ph.D. was the Keynote speaker at the 3rd Commonwealth of Dominica Ontario Association, [\(CDOA\)](#) Annual Fundraising Gala for the Princess Margaret Hospital, held on September 30, 2006. He is an active academic and community based HIV researcher and an advocate for the involvement of communities in improving their health status. Dr. George is an Ontario HIV Treatment Network Postdoctoral fellow, at St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto, Canada, a board member of the African and Caribbean Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario and the Chairperson of the Research and Development Committee of the Dominica Academy of Arts and Sciences (DAAS).

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