



Sound Off

In the August and September 2007 issues, we asked you, our readers: **What is the most important public health problem facing the world today and how should it be addressed?** Here are two of the responses we received. See the box at right for our next Sound Off prompt.

Prevent and Treat HIV/AIDS

I believe that HIV/AIDS is the most important public health problem facing the world today. Twenty-five years into this epidemic, 33 million people live with HIV worldwide, 2.5 million are infected with the virus each year, and 8,000 die from AIDS each day. HIV/AIDS does not discriminate; it affects people of all races, ethnicities, ages, sexes, and nationalities. And while we have made many advances in understanding the epidemic, designing prevention services, discovering novel testing techniques, and developing highly effective, life prolonging medications, we still do not have the problem under control.

We can combat HIV/AIDS effectively by focusing on a number of measures that are already being undertaken—although not as effectively, perhaps, as one would hope. Encouraging routine HIV screenings and developing prevention interventions for at-risk populations can help to limit the infection's spread. We should also support efforts to develop vaccines against HIV/AIDS. And we need to ensure that everyone affected by the epidemic—

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including women and children—has access to care and treatment.

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Support Impoverished Populations

I had several roundtable discussions with my VA colleagues about their views on the world's greatest health problem, and what emerged was not a consensus about one main issue but a variety of concerns. Some of my colleagues mentioned the soaring costs of health care and medications within our borders and the fact that many American citizens cannot pay for these necessities. Others brought up the continuing AIDS epidemic, which caused 2.9 million deaths worldwide in 2006. Overall, though, I noticed that my colleagues tended not to think globally.

For my part, I view the improvement of health in impoverished populations as the world's greatest public health challenge. In today's world, 10% of the richest people hold 85% of the world's assets.¹ The discouraging plight of populations in economically vulnerable areas has been documented in many recent medical journal articles. These populations have a high prevalence of tuberculosis, diarrhea, AIDS, famine, and communicable diseases.¹⁻³ They also tend to live in unhygienic conditions; in fact, 40% of the world's population has no access to toilets.³

We need to reach out to impoverished populations to provide health education and treatment and to help eradicate diseases and unsanitary conditions. At the most basic level, instilling hygienic standards in developing countries would play an important role in halting disease transmission. The elemental ingredients of soap and water could be the starting point for positive change. ●

—Name withheld at author's request

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