Looking back on the AIDS epidemic should teach us to prioritize attending to the mental health of sufferers and caregivers and depoliticizing prevention strategies.

Patients with HIV-spectrum illness faced stigmatization and societal indifference, including rejection by family members, increased rates of suicide, fears of sexual and/or intrauterine transmission, substance abuse issues, and alterations of body image for those with wasting syndromes and disfiguring Kaposi lesions. AIDS prevention strategies such as the provision of condoms and needle exchange programs were controversial, and many caregivers exposed to contaminated fluids had to endure months of antiretroviral treatment.

Similar to the AIDS epidemic, the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant psychological implications for patients and caregivers. Patients with COVID-19 infections also face feelings of guilt over potentially exposing a family member to the virus; devastating socioeconomic issues; restrictive hospital visitation policies for family members; disease news oversaturation; and feelings of hopelessness. People with AIDS in the 1980s faced the possibility of dying alone, and there was initial skepticism about medications to treat HIV—just as some individuals are now uneasy about recently introduced coronavirus vaccines.

The similarities of both diseases allow us some foresight on how to deal with current COVID-19 issues. Looking back on the AIDS epidemic should teach us to prioritize attending to the mental health of sufferers and caregivers, creating advocacy and support groups for when a patient’s family is unavailable, instilling public confidence in treatment options, maintaining staff morale, addressing substance abuse (due to COVID-related stress), and depoliticizing prevention strategies. Addressing these issues is especially critical for minority populations.

As respected medical care leaders, we can provide and draw extra attention to the needs of patients’ family members and health care personnel during this COVID-19 pandemic. Hopefully, the distribution of vaccines will shorten some of our communal and professional distress.

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Let’s apply the lessons from the AIDS crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic

In 2020, COVID-19 disrupted our medical system, and life in general. In the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic devastated communities and overwhelmed hospitals. There were lessons learned from the AIDS epidemic that can be applied to the current situation.

Patients with HIV-spectrum illness faced