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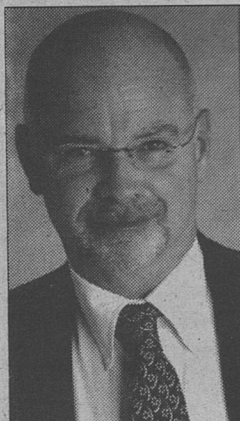
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Health Views: Open Letter to Black Gay & Bisexual Men

Men who have sex with men (MSM) bear a greater burden of HIV than any other group in the U.S. We account for an estimated 45 percent of people living with HIV, compared to 27 percent infected through heterosexual contact, and 22 percent infected through injection drug use.

In June, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a study showing a stunning 46 percent — nearly half — of the Black homosexual and bisexual men surveyed in five major cities were already HIV-positive (more than twice the infection rate among men of other races).

To make matters worse, more than two thirds of the HIV-infected Black men in the study were unaware of their infection. That's right. Half of us may be infected and, of that half, two thirds don't know it and so almost certainly aren't doing anything about it.

The factors contributing to the spread of HIV among Black gay and bisexual men are complex and vary from person to person. While some men do not yet recognize the level of risk they face, others are making complex decisions about sex and relationships based on perceptions about their partners' serostatus, old myths, and plain misinformation rather than real knowledge and open communication. There is a perception that AIDS is not as bad as it was, and of course there is an understandable desire among many of us to just enjoy relationships and have plain fun. Many of us are just tired of talking about how we are all going to die. But that fatigue will kill us. Disease does not have to overshadow our lives, but we must remain aware enough of it to protect ourselves.

Forty-six percent isn't a catastrophe. It's genocide!

But, where is the outrage? As far as we can tell, following the CDC's announcement no Black or gay media organizations ran front-page stories. No civil rights organization marched in the streets or called on policy makers to take action. No Black celebrities sponsored relief concerts. There wasn't even a call to action issued by a Black gay and lesbian organization!

Now we could make charges of racism and homophobia (and some of us have). And, we might



be right. But, those charges would not be helpful and may be beside the point. A Black LGBT group

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founded to advocate for civil marriage rights sponsored a town hall meeting on "The State of Black LGBT America" during the annual Black Gay Pride event in Los Angeles in July. AIDS was not even on the agenda. Nearly 50 percent of Black Gay men in America may already be infected with HIV, and AIDS is not on our agenda? How can that be? While equal rights, including the right to marry, are certainly worthwhile goals, they are not very useful to us if we are dead. Keeping us alive long enough to enjoy the rights we deserve should at least be on the list.

This is not the first time the alarm has been sounded. An eye-opening 1994 study put the HIV prevalence among Black homosexual and bisexual men at 21 percent. We did virtually nothing in response. That study was followed by a CDC study in 2000 in which — surprise, surprise — the prevalence rate among Black MSM had increased to over 30 percent. And again, after calling on the CDC to do more, we did virtually nothing. Now we're looking at 50 percent.

What will it take? How many Black gay men have to get infected, get sick and die before we — not CDC, not the Congressional Black Caucus, not the large AIDS

organizations, but us — mobilize and take action?

Following CDC's prevention conference in June some Black gay and AIDS activists grumbled about the amount of attention crystal meth is getting. Please. White gay men are doing exactly what they should be doing. They are forcing each other to take responsibility, be accountable and attack a threat that is attacking them. Meanwhile, we're dancing from pride event to pride event while this threat is barreling down on us.

We have to start a national public discourse among ourselves

about this new AIDS reality. We must create a cultural shift to where knowing your HIV status is the norm, where those of us who are negative are committed to stay that way and where those of us who are positive refuse to engage in behavior that might expose our brothers to the virus. We must all support each other in our collective and individual campaigns to end the epidemic. Nothing short of an all out mobilization is acceptable. We must not allow any of the institutions or businesses that we support to fail to do their part in ending this epidemic. Most importantly, we must increase our visibility and demand our rightful places in our communities.

There is a role for all parties to play — government, the larger Black community, the white LGBT community, our society as a whole — but we must be willing to hold ourselves accountable and responsible for our own survival. How can Black gay and bisexual or same gender loving men ask others to respond if we continue to be so complacent in the face of our own genocide? ▼

Phill Wilson is the director of the Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles, CA. Forty-nine prominent activists signed this letter.