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Politics and Public Health: HIV Prevention and *The Wisdom of Whores*

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ABSTRACT

The Wisdom of Whores, a 2008 non-fiction work on the on-going HIV epidemic, properly assesses the current state of HIV interventions and many of the political, social, and economic barriers that are encountered by public health professionals. This book notes the use of peer outreach among at-risk groups, an intervention that has been important in mitigating the spread of this pathogen. Furthermore, its candid documentation of the creation of UNAIDS makes *Wisdom* a mainstay of any public health worker or epidemiologist's library.

KEYWORDS: HIV, public health

Elizabeth Pisani's 2008 autobiography-cum-HIV narrative, *The Wisdom of Whores: Bureaucrats, Brothels and the Business of AIDS*, offers an unflinching look into the global rise of HIV/AIDS, the politics behind this disease, and its acute impact in South-East Asia. Pisani, a reporter-turned-epidemiologist, narrates HIV issues with a journalistic flair and unapologetic views of more recent HIV issues, including the rise of underdevelopment as the major contributing factor to HIV spread. This, according to Pisani, has become a predominant lens through which the epidemic has been viewed, because it is less controversial for politicians to discuss development as opposed

to sexual intercourse and injection drug use.^{1(pg.125)} In her opinion, this eclipses the sexual aspects of the disease, leading to the neglect of interventions that could prevent the sexual transmission of this disease.^{1(pg.125)}

The history of HIV, the early years of the disease's spread through San Francisco bath houses, as well as the gay community and the creation of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) are also well documented in *Wisdom*. Pisani comments on the initial rapid uptake of condoms among gay men as well as the current concern among public health workers about declining condom rates in this population, which she attributes to the advent of effective anti-retroviral drugs.^{1(pg.174)} Her commentary on the creation of UNAIDS is insightful with regards to the infighting and jurisdictional disputes brought about

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by the issue of HIV/AIDS and the eventual multifaceted approach to combating this disease.

Wisdom also offers an intimate view of the waria, a group of genderqueer individuals in Indonesia, who in the early stages of this epidemic had both high rates of infection and transmission due to their work in the sex trade as well as through their personal relations. By tapping this group and educating them about HIV/AIDS, public health organizations have been able to utilize these individuals as peer health educators. The waria have since become turncoats in the war on HIV, promoting condom use among sex workers and their clients, and lobbying political bodies for effective health interventions for sex workers across Asia.^{1(pg.168)}


However, it is while examining the various public health programs and interventions to prevent HIV/AIDS that Pisani is at her finest. Differentiating between a program's laboratory efficacy and its level of effectiveness in the "real" world, she explains why some interventions are simply ineffective and how political groups can often malign many effective intervention programs. Pisani's primary example of a public health failure is the design of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS (PEPFAR) implemented by George W. Bush during his time as President of the United States. PEPFAR's funding for condoms is limited to serodiscordant couples, perpetuating that condoms should only be used to prevent HIV if an individual already knows they are infected.^{1(pg.205)} This intervention, which is restricted by the political ideology of the donor, resulted in the use of funds for abstinence-only education, an intervention that has repeatedly been proven ineffective. Due to the influence of political values, the potential impact of this intervention was passively inhibited, ultimately reducing the potential benefits of this monetary support.

Pisani also criticizes the culturally inappropriate nature of PEPFAR, noting that the mores propagated by this intervention reflect those of the donor country, and are not consistent with those of the recipient country.^{1(pg. 205)} As such, one of the themes throughout *Wisdom* is that culturally appropriate interventions are necessary to ensure the effectiveness of a given public health intervention, a theme consistent with the dominant trend in current international public health.

This work creates a greater awareness of the nature of international public health efforts, and acts to foster biopsychosocial awareness with regards to those afflicted by HIV/AIDS. Oftentimes it is difficult for physicians to understand the logic behind decisions made by patients who expose either themselves or others to certain health risks. By explaining the social, political, and economic factors affecting HIV-positive individuals, clinicians will better appreciate the situational factors that influence a patient's decisions.

Wisdom aptly critiques many components of the international response to the HIV pandemic; Pisani's discussion of HIV transmission in groups that self-defined their gender is particularly courageous given that these groups are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream discussions of HIV transmission. Yet Pisani disregards dialogue regarding development factors and their role in HIV transmission. This is troubling because development factors are a major aspect of current public health policy, given that social factors play an important role in HIV transmission, and

cannot truly be negated as contributors to pathogen transmission without explicit epidemiological studies.

Direct, while remaining personal and humane, *The Wisdom of Whores* is a worthwhile read for those interested in infectious diseases and the social, political, and epidemiological issues which they encompass. Those interested in careers in preventative medicine will find this book particularly insightful. 

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