

# The Penetrable Body

Category: Mistakes

written by Mary J. Mahoney | September 13, 2016

In 1983, the community hospital where I worked did not yet use the acronym AIDS. We used another one—FUO, for fever of unknown origin—which was emblazoned in marker on a red card on the doorjambs of certain private rooms. These rooms each had an anteroom with a sink and a hamper. This is where the donning and removal of protective suits took place. In this 4-foot-by-6-foot space between the hall and the patient's room, the garbage cans bore biohazard symbols, and the red bags inside them were doubled and then encased in a third, clear garbage bag—to protect us, we were told.

For those who entered the rooms, the signs and procedures were intended to signal that these patients' blood and body fluids were toxic. But they did more than send a signal—they blared and bellowed these patients' status. They implied that their body fluids might leap with agency into another's body, like a raptor seeking its prey. Even if we entered one of those rooms only to take a patient's blood pressure, we were required, without exception, to put on a white plastic space suit, shoe covers, a mask, goggles, a cap and slippers, like astronauts preparing to navigate this otherworld inhabited by patients with a mystery disease, which would in two years' time be known as AIDS.

Even then, in the early years of my work as a nurse (I was barely twenty), I believed that this was a mistake, that those of us who did (or did not) enter these rooms were complicit in these patients' suffering. I wondered why on this earth, in this hospital, within this healing space, no one saw our living theater of shame.

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