

When Babies Died

Category: Contagion

written by David Coulter | March 15, 2020

I arrived at Boston City Hospital in 1986 as the new 38-year-old chief of child neurology. I soon realized that many of our tiny patients were dying from AIDS. The pediatric cases were the victims of “vertical transmission,” due to their mothers’ being infected. There was no treatment. Zidovudine (AZT) was not yet approved for pregnant women or their babies. So the mothers transmitted the virus to their babies and the babies got sick and died.

Dr. Ellen Cooper (may God bless her) saw the need and dedicated her career as a pediatric infectious disease specialist to caring for these kids. Boston City Hospital set aside a special unit, Dowling 5 North, as an orphanage for kids whose parents had died from AIDS.

My role was to care for the children who had HIV-related encephalopathy. I saw them and took care of all of them. From 1986 to at least 1992, however, they all died. Once HAART became available in the mid-1990s, they began to survive.

Now kids who get HIV at birth no longer need a neurologist. They can grow up normally. So there is hope. My point is that in the midst of the current contagion with the coronavirus, we need to remember that our primary responsibility as health-care providers is to *care* for those who need us.

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