

The Bell Curve

Category: Pills

written by Margaret Kim Peterson | July 3, 2023

The current daily medication regimen for a lot of people with HIV involves one pill. Granted, there are several drugs in that one pill; they're all lumped in there together to make it easier for people to comply with the requirement that they take all their meds, every single day. Still, there's a part of me that can hardly believe it. One pill. One pill! And it actually keeps people healthy!

Thirty-five years ago, when HIV and AIDS first entered my life, there was also one pill: AZT, the very first medication approved for treating HIV itself (as opposed to the many opportunistic infections associated with HIV and AIDS). I remember the day my future husband was prescribed it: a white capsule with a blue band, to be taken five times a day. Might it actually work? Might it keep him healthy?

It didn't.

So in between these two tails of the normal curve—the one pill available then for people with HIV, and the one pill taken by people with HIV today—grew a great swell of medication: drugs to treat HIV infection itself, drugs to treat opportunistic infections, drugs as prophylaxis against other opportunistic infections, drugs for fever, drugs for pain, drugs to combat the side effects of other medications.

They weren't all pills. Some were injections, some were infusions, some were elixirs or suspensions or aerosols. But most of them were pills. When my husband died, in the fall of 1995, at the peak of another curve, that of deaths from AIDS in the United States, among the things left for me to sort out was all his leftover prescription medication, some 12,000 capsules and tablets of it.

Even now the names of these drugs roll over me like a wave: Mepron, Bactrim, Biaxin, Mycelex, Compazine, Diflucan, Cipro, Dilaudid, Reglan, MSContin, Rifabutin, 3TC, Valium, Zofran, Ceftin, Zantac, Prilosec, Ethambutol, Lamprene, Amitriptylene, Tylox. And, of course, AZT. It all went back to the clinic, where it was redispensed (shh!!) to patients without insurance. But before I gave it back I gathered all the pill bottles—119 of them—and took a picture.

Those of us who were around during the bad old days of AIDS can feel poignantly alone with our memories of how things used to be. Hasn't it always been possible to treat HIV with one pill? No, it has not. That photograph bears witness.

*Margaret Kim Peterson
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*