

UCL Early AIDS Crisis Told By Activists



ACT UP Protest in New York City, July 15, 1980

INTRODUCTION

- ❖ **1981:** CDC reports that 5 men, all active homosexuals, were treated for ‘pneumonia’ (US death count: 234)
 - ❖ **1982:** CDC finally identifies and names the disease (US death count: 852)
 - ❖ **1983:** CDC identifies the routes of transmission (US death count: 2,304)
 - ❖ **1984:** Reagan first time saying the word “AIDS” (US death count: 4,251)
 - ❖ **1987:** FDA approved first AIDS treatment (US death count: 20,436)
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- ❖ Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndroms (AIDS), the most advanced stage of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), attacks white blood cells and weakens the immune system.
 - ❖ AIDS quickly became a death sentence but the government remained silent
 - ❖ Activists played a fundamental role in raising awareness and putting pressure on the government to act



ACT UP Wallstreet Protest, March 24, 1988

METHODS

- ❖ Thesis: perceived effectiveness of U.S and UK government responses to the AIDS epidemic between 1981 and 1993
- ❖ 6 week research period with professor Jonathan Bell and Lucas Dastros-Pitei
- ❖ Split between investigating government responses and their respective activist responses
- ❖ Used primary sources and interviews from ACT UP Oral History Project



ACT UP National Institutes of Health Protest, May 21, 1990

ACCESS TO TREATMENTS

- Slow Drug Approval:** drug trials took between 8 to 10 years until public access, AZT’s approval was sped up to 16 weeks
- ❖ FDA didn’t approve other medication so quickly, even after AZT wasn’t as effective and very toxic
 - ❖ Patients were not allowed to access experimental drugs
 - ❖ Patients needed to stop all other medication, even those which were keeping them alive, during clinical trials
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- ❖ 1988: ACT UP protestors disrupted FDA headquarters and one year later early release of drugs and treatments to terminal patients who had exhausted all other options became legal



ACT UP Food and Drug Administration Protest, October 10, 1989



ACT UP National Institutes of Health Protest, May 21, 1990

- Pricing:** AZT cost \$8,000 a year (\$17,000 in today dollars), other combination drugs cost 12,000 to 20,000 per year
- ❖ ACT UP got companies to drop the costs of Crixivan by \$1,500
 - ❖ ACT UP smuggled cheaper drugs from Mexico and Canada, which later became legal for patients who exhausted all other options

TARGET BUSH

- Bush’s Silence:** made his first statement a year after taking office
- ❖ Called for compassion for people with AIDS and promised to outlaw discrimination but nothing for money



ACT UP Kennebunkport Action Against Bush, September 1, 1991

- Kennebunkport Action:** present Bush with a banner that listed all the actions he could take to end the AIDS crisis at his family/vacation home
- ❖ Doing it so the world would know what’s going on, draw attention, and make them read information



ACT UP Kennebunkport Action, September 1, 1991

- War at Home:** Bush was spending millions on the Gulf war and relatively nothing for the AIDS war
- ❖ ACT UP infiltrated news stations with the purpose of getting on camera and informing the public that the war was at home, the war was against AIDS

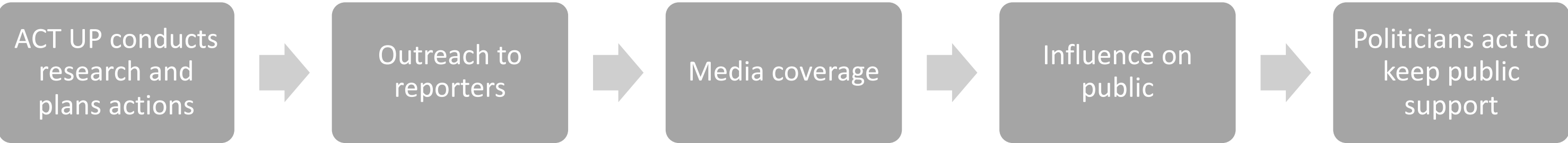
NEEDLE EXCHANGE

- Situation:** ACT UP wanted to hand out needle in hope to reduce HIV infections amongst injection drug users, however, needle possession was illegal
- ❖ ACT UP made public stands to hand out and exchange needles

- Legal Win:** needle possession held up to one year in prison, sent to trial for needle exchange stands
- ❖ Won the trial on the necessity defense (doing something that is necessary to prevent imminent harm and there is no other way to achieve the same outcome)
 - ❖ Main goal was to raise awareness and force the government to take responsibility

POWER OF THE MEDIA

- ACT UP used the media to raise awareness and gain public support to put pressure on people in power to stop the AIDS crisis

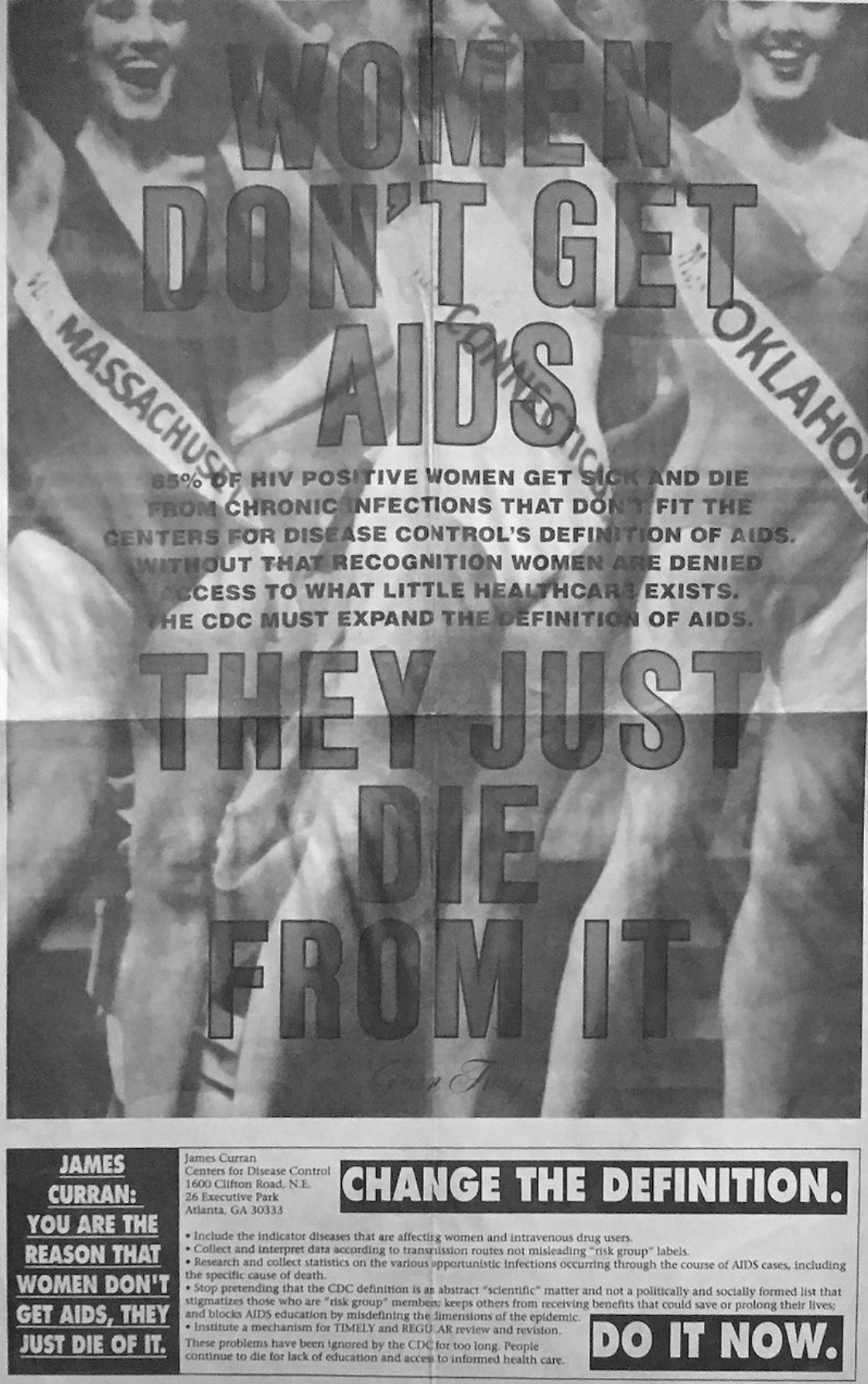


HIDDEN DISCRIMINATION

- White homosexual men:** ACT UP was a predominantly white male group who were suddenly stripped of their privileges
- ❖ Fueled the power of ACT UP due to the sudden nature of AIDS which probably triggered a feeling of injustice in the white men
 - ❖ Other minorities were overlooked

- Women:** discriminated during the AIDS epidemic
- ❖ Weren’t included in CDC definition until 1990, so didn’t have access to healthcare benefits
 - ❖ Women of child bearing ages weren’t allowed to participate in clinical trials, but men were
 - ❖ First government funded research on women and AIDS in 1993

- People of Color:**
- ❖ Lack of representation on leadership roles in ACT making outreach to those communities very difficult
 - ❖ 1996 - AIDS is no longer leading cause of death for all Americans ages 25-44, although it remains the leading cause of death for African Americans in this age group.
 - ❖ In 1998, African Americans account for 49% of U.S. AIDS-related deaths.
 - ❖ AIDS-related mortality for African Americans is almost 10 times that of Whites and three times that of Hispanics.



ACT UP Kings County Hospital Action, 1989