

Quarantining AIDS

Peg Tittle

What does a clear-thinking society do when a contagious and fatal disease breaks out?

- (a) shoot everyone who gets it
- (b) worry a lot and hope like hell you're not next
- (c) quarantine those affected and help them make the best of what's left of their lives

To our credit, we haven't chosen (a). To our discredit, we haven't chosen (c). (And if you've read the How-Not-To-Flunk Guide to Multiple-Choice Tests, you know that (c) is the correct answer because it's the longest.)

I am, of course, talking about AIDS.

Quarantine? Are you serious? Well, yes. It was good enough for the Bubonic Plague, tuberculosis, and the Ebola virus. Why shouldn't it do for AIDS? We don't have to shoot them. Some of them are very nice people. A quarantine is the obvious solution.

So why haven't we done the obvious? Why haven't we put our AIDS people in quarantine? I think it's because we made two mistakes early on, and we're stumbling over ourselves to make up for them. One, we associated AIDS with sex, most especially homosex. Two, we associated sex, most especially homosex, with morality. And so we associated AIDS with morality: getting AIDS was a sure sign of sin.

But, with a little help from the Red Cross, we've grown up since then. We know now that some of them are very nice people. And, well, if we quarantine them, that would make them feel like outcasts. And we're trying so hard to accept them now, to apologize for our past stupidity.

Yeah, with our present stupidity: it could prove to be a very costly apology. Evil or not, people with AIDS are contagious, fatally so, under certain specific conditions. Just like--

But but but, you stutter, it's not the same, you can't get AIDS just by breathing. Good point. Though for many people, having sex is pretty much the same as breathing. (And certainly for a good number, shooting up is just as important as breathing.)

But you're quite right, it's not quite the same, AIDS is not quite as easily spread. Which is why (d) is really the right answer: mandatory testing and a tattoo.

But but but, you gasp this time, that's what they did to the Jews in Nazi Germany, they were 'branded' with the yellow Star of David, that's discrimination!

But but, I butt back, this is justified discrimination-- justified because of one important difference: sex with a Jew won't kill you. (Well, okay, it depends on the Jew. I wouldn't screw around with Abraham.)

It doesn't have to be a big thing, no scarlet letter on the forehead--though of course an 'A' turns out to be appropriate. In fact, it doesn't even have to be that visible. Maybe something discreetly placed on the hip, a little warning sign of the danger ahead--or below as the case is. First Aiders, however, might prefer it to be a little less discreetly placed, maybe something on the chest would suffice--most people don't walk around with a pair of latex gloves in their wallet. (I said 'most'.) A skull-and-bones is a little too pessimistic, I think. A red circle with a diagonal, the universal 'no'? Wait, I've got it--a happy face!

Whatever, only the unenlightened would see it as a brand. (And the unenlightened have already branded people with AIDS.) The rest of us could see it simply as a warning sign--or maybe as a fashion statement: I'm into dry sex. In any case, a tattoo would enable people with AIDS to walk among us, without endangering us: as long as we knew who they were, we'd be safe--we could choose to avoid the exchange of bodily fluids.

Unless, of course, they forced themselves (and their fluids) upon us. But not even a quarantine would prevent that; we've tried it--we call it prison. So maybe we should consider (a)--maybe we should shoot them. Or maybe, at least, we should shoot the ones with a history of such forcible contact: people known to have raped or initiated blood-spattering fights, if and when they get AIDS, should be shot. Well, no, let's be humane about it, let's wait until a person with AIDS actually rapes or gets into a fight with someone, charge them with first degree murder--and then shoot them. And in the meantime, we can do (b), just worry a lot and hope like hell we're not that someone.