# HIV Has Changed. Our policies must too – op-ed

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40 years ago, the first case of an AIDS-related condition in Western Australia was reported. The treating nurses at Royal Perth Hospital each wore three sets of gloves, and three sets of masks. The fear was palpable, and it grew into a state of public panic with each new notification.

These days, you don’t hear much about AIDS-related conditions. In four decades, the four-letter term has become an anachronism. Even the Western Australian AIDS Council is now simply called WAAC.

Through the efforts of WAAC and its partners, AIDS has been eliminated as a public health issue in Australia. People with HIV no longer go on to develop AIDS-related conditions.

In fact, effective treatments mean that people with HIV can expect to live as long as anyone else. Current treatment can lower the amount of virus in the body to the point that it is undetectable and therefore incapable of being sexually transmitted to another person. The science tells us it is completely safe to have sex with people who have an undetectable viral load, and over 90% of people living with HIV in WA fall into this category.

While medical breakthroughs have transformed the body’s response to HIV, there is no pill to change public attitudes towards people living with HIV. Instead, the way we change attitudes is through conversation and education.

WAAC’s latest campaign invites the community to step forward and fight stigma. It brings together nine people living with different chronic conditions, including two people living with HIV. The campaign shows that people living with HIV experience considerably fewer physical consequences associated with their diagnosis compared to people living with common conditions like hypertension and asthma; however, they disproportionately encounter experiences that diminish their dignity.

Encouragingly, there are signs that community attitudes are changing. Research from the University of New South Wales points to evidence of a decrease in the proportion of Australians who report they would behave negatively towards someone because of their HIV status. Most of us now know that it is safe to eat with, work with, kiss, and hold the hand of a person living with HIV. We are learning to treat people with HIV in the same way that we treat any of the other 12 million Australians living with a chronic condition - namely, with kindness, compassion and respect.

Yet, many of our laws and public policies continue to lag behind both science and community sentiment. In 2014, the State Government introduced laws which enable people who spit at police officers to be involuntarily tested for HIV. These same laws were amended in 2020 to enable people to be tested for COVID-19.

We don’t disagree with the premise that spitting is a degrading act and that police officers have a right to safe workplaces. Dignity is important.

Our issue with the law relates to the fact that it perpetuates an outdated and scientifically disproven myth that HIV can be transmitted through contact with saliva. Myths such as these create a climate for stigma and discrimination to thrive and resurface in our community. Our laws should show lead us forward, not drag us back.

Last year, the Department of Health’s Communicable Disease Control Directorate released guidelines around the mandatory testing laws. Those guidelines acknowledge that the risk of HIV transfer associated with spitting is zero. Zero. Yet, the anti-scientific law remains in force.

Our recent experience of COVID-19 has shown us that our public health responses can and should change in response to new evidence and changing risk profiles. For instance, the need for strict masking and social distancing policies has been abated now that the majority of Western Australians are vaccinated against COVID-19. Why is it then that our public policies around HIV continue to be based on fear, and not science?

In 40 years, scientific and community responses to HIV have come a long way. The time has come for our laws and policies to catch up.

Dr Daniel Vujcich is the CEO of WAAC. *December 1 is World AIDS Day. Visit* [*waac.com.au*](http://www.waac.com.au) *to watch WAAC’s “Step Forward: Fight Stigma” campaign video.*

**ENDS**

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