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*A Primer on
HIV, AIDS & the Filipino*

SHATTERING the Myths

Michael L. Tan, Ph.D.

with a Foreword by
Margarita Go Singco-Holmes, Ph.D.



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HIV, AIDS, and the Filipino*

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Anvil

Shattering the myths
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F O R E W O R D

At last, Dr. Michael Tan's book on HIV/AIDS. The book Anvil publisher Karina Bolasco and myself have been waiting for him to finish for over three years now. As it turned out, the wait was worth it. Way well worth it. And while I couldn't say it was *the* definitive book on AIDS (but only because there can be no definitive book on any subject that, as of 1994, has had over 90,000 scientific journal articles published on it. Yup. Over 90,000. And if you're wondering why I'm so sure of the number it's because Mike Tan told me.

Make no mistake. I am no naive virgin believing every statistic some smooth talking guy gives me. I usually check and recheck claims purported to be facts. But because Mike Tan said some guy (actually, Jay Levy, one of the leading authorities on AIDS) said it, I know it's true.

Because that's the kind of guy Mike is, you see—not given to making claims he can't back up, analytical, circumspect, rational and yet not in a ponderous, pedantic, loving-to-hear-himself-expound-on-things and-who-cares-if-people-couldn't-care-less kind of way, (definitely not!). Kind and generous and yet not in the boring way bleeding heart liberals and the politically correct are.

All the above qualities are the very same qualities that distinguish this book from many other books on HIV/AIDS.

Other books usually suffer from one of two distinct faults: they are ultra scientific and never let you forget it. Thus they are usually hard to understand because they insist on making themselves remote from the everyday lives of everyday people. A pity that, because science need not be divorced from people's lives, as this here book shows.

On the other extreme, are the other books on AIDS: friendly, down-to-earth-let-me-tell-you-about-my-cousin-Ed kind of books which would be terrific if it didn't stop there. If only the homey tone could be coupled with a scientific subtext. Alas, that marriage, while one made in heaven, hardly ever occurs here on earth. *Except*, of course, in a book such as this.

One of the things that makes this book so great is that Mike is not an armchair theorist. He actually goes out in the field. He not only lectures (which a lot of people who go out in the field merely do—even if they lecture wonderfully) but actually listens, and in so listening, actually learns from the people he deals with and teaches. As a consequence, he constantly adds new material to what he shares during his workshops and to what he writes in his articles and books.

This book compiles the most common myths encountered about HIV. These myths were culled from questions asked most frequently in workshops, as well as from the most common misconceptions that we see in the media. Mike started this preface by stating that HIV/AIDS is complex

and confusing but it really need not be that way. There are only a few basic facts about HIV/AIDS which we need to spread around. This book brings out those basic facts, simplifying without becoming simplistic.

Mike presents all these common facts in a most uncommon fashion. He shares complex issues in a manner that is easy to read, without sacrificing depth and nuances. He contextualizes these myths so that one understands how the myths came about, why they are being perpetuated and thus how we can combat them in our own lives.

Consistent with a biomedical scientist's view that knowledge is power, he shares with us the most current research on AIDS. And yet, consistent also with a social scientist's realization that social and behavioral dimensions are just as important, he doesn't insist on any one particular course of action. He makes clear what course he thinks is best to take, while leaving room for others to choose another path that may be better suited for him or her.

That is because of his unfailing respect for the reader. This, respect, in fact, is one of the most outstanding features of this book. A respect that doesn't blare out: "See how much I respect you so listen to me" but is unmistakably, albeit quietly, there.

This quietness reminds me of the analogy between modern (American) dance and traditional (Balinese) dancing, an analogy admittedly perpetuated by the traditional rather than the modern practitioners of dance. Modern dance uses big movements, arms, legs, whole torsos. Balinese dance may use very slight movements—the flicker of an eye, the crook of a finger. Modern dance shouts, whereas traditional dance whispers.

Indeed. But oh the messages he manages to convey! Messages like, be “good” but if you can’t be good, be careful. Or, even more subtly, finely-nuanced than that, you can be good (e.g., nonmarital consensual sex can be just as “good,” as marital sex) but please still be careful.

And be careful about more than HIV/AIDS. Of course you must be careful you don’t get AIDS. But just as important is to be careful you don’t hurt emotionally and spiritually either. Don’t hurt yourself or any other person you encounter. Because these things matter as much as, if not even more than, the biomedical parts of us.

What also stands out in this book is the congruence between who the writer is and what he says: the quiet humor (better “pasma” than AIDS); his sense of irony (the “leakage” argument is itself “full of holes”); his breadth and depth of knowledge.

Read this book because it will help you understand about AIDS in a way that goes beyond the plumbing and helps you see why it is so rampant and what we must do to make it less so.

The best reasons there is, however, is not only because it’s about AIDS—though that, certainly, is reason enough in this day, age and social climate—but because it’s about love and caring, fear and courage and, ultimately, what it means to live and to be fully human.

Dr. MARGARITA GO SINGCO-HOLMES

P R E F A C E

I write this in Cebu, the last stop in a series of workshops on HIV/AIDS for media practitioners. The workshops have produced mixed results: improved coverage in the sense of more accurate and responsible reporting, as well as continuing sensationalism in other cases.

Perhaps "sensationalism" isn't quite the right term to use. Whether with media practitioners or a health educator, HIV/AIDS is always complex and confusing, a topic that is difficult to write about. The biomedical aspects of HIV/AIDS involve details that even physicians are not familiar with. Jay Levy, one of the leading authorities on HIV, has noted that as of 1994, over 90,000 scientific journal articles have been published on HIV/AIDS. Never in human history has so much been written about a disease in so short a time.

Even more complex than the biomedical facts are the social and behavioral dimensions. Knowing how HIV spreads isn't just a matter of virology: we need to know why people take the risks and how society might contribute to those risks.

We know that myths hamper the prevention of HIV either by creating complacency or by fueling irrational fears. I have talked with young people who have become paranoid about the risks of getting HIV from kissing and yet

are engaging in unprotected sex. Any kind of illness elicits unease, thus the term dis-ease. The more serious the illness, the greater the physical and emotional distress, not only on the patient but also on the patient's friends, relatives and with society. These tend to be more intense with HIV, a disease that is at once mysterious yet involving the most intimate of human behavior: sex.

HIV/AIDS is, at present at least, incurable and fatal. The fact that such a disease emerged in the 1980s makes it more disconcerting, coming at a time when humanity presumed that all illnesses could be conquered by modern technology.

The myths that have emerged around HIV reflect society's collective anxieties about many issues. These feelings are sometimes ambivalent, even contradictory. We want to be modern, yet fear modernity and therefore blame it on HIV. We enjoy sex, which is life-giving, yet fear the HIV epidemic as a direct link to death.

Myths are dangerous because they often incorporate elements of truth. Myths grow, sometimes in the absence of alternative explanations, but more often because of our need to cling on to a certain mindset. It is amazing, for example, how even in western countries, the media continues to periodically parade out some scientist claiming that saliva spreads HIV. If this were true, then millions and millions of people must be affected by now.

Moreover, HIV fuels our fear of people different from us, mainly because we think about self-righteous preachers insisting that HIV equates with immorality. Just as problematic are the NGOs and scientists who live off the epidemic and find it useful to inflate the problem. They create scenarios of a Holocaust and use fear tactics that often only drive people into a sense of hopelessness and apathy.

We need to shatter the myths surrounding HIV/AIDS. I do not believe that information alone will bring about behavioral change, but it is important to provide people with access to facts and to encourage critical thinking. All that's needed, quite often, is a little time to talk. It is not enough to have quick lectures; people need to process the facts and figures, to resolve whatever lingering questions and doubts there may be. If HIV thrives on fear and prejudice, then fighting this virus will come only when we harness all the other more powerful attributes we have as human beings: the ability to be rational, as well as our capability to empathize.

In the tradition of the health NGOs I work with, I am introducing an interactive dimension to this book: at the end of the manual you will find references, a resource list, as well as a feedback form that you can send back to us for comments and more specific inquiries.

Writing books is always an ordeal, not so much for the writer than the writer's family and friends. Many people need to be acknowledged for providing support in producing this book. There is the staff at Health Action Information Network (HAIN), particularly Bernard Tomas, Gerardo Andamo, Ced Apilado and Noemi Bayoneta who have worked with me most closely on HIV/AIDS projects. I also thank my parents, Julio and Nieves Tan, who have had to put up with having half of their house taken over by my clutter every time I have a writing project.

Then there is Liza Enriquez of Pinoy Plus, who is there to remind me constantly that the reason we do HIV programs is because there are people living with, and fighting HIV. I would also like to thank Ani Habúlan of Anvil, who rushed the production of this book to beat several deadlines. *Maraming salamat* as well to Karina Bolasco and Margy Holmes who coaxed me into finishing this book and convincing me that this deserves priority, that more than lectures and workshops, a book is needed to shatter the dangerous myths that allow HIV to wreak so much havoc.

Finally, having to work with different bureaucracies from the University of the Philippines to the Department of Health, I have to end this with a disclaimer: opinions expressed in this book are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of organizations I have worked with.

Dr. MICHAEL L. TAN

