



The AIDS Grim Reaper Campaign (C) Twenty years on

Despite the profound and prolonged impact of the Grim Reaper campaign, by the beginning of the 21st century, infection rates in Australia were on the rise. Between 2000 and 2005, the number of new HIV diagnoses had risen by 41 percent.¹ All states and territories showed increases, however the rise was most pronounced in Queensland and Victoria – by 2006, the number of diagnoses in the latter state was at its highest level for 20 years (*Exhibit 1*).

Research indicated that the many of the new cases were presenting with recently acquired infections. And of these new cases, most (80-85 percent)² were men who had contracted the virus homosexual contact but infections amongst straight women and IV drug users were also of concern.³ No-one could attribute the increase to any one cause but there were a number of theories and contributing factors. One was that improved treatments and prognoses for sufferers had made gay men and the broader population less vigilant about protection. Said chief executive of VicHealth Rob Moodie:

“During the 1990s we saw much lower death rates, which was terrific, and HIV went from being a fatal disease to a chronic manageable disease. But partly because of that . . . there was some complacency in our system of education and prevention, and things like condom promotion and safe sex education aren’t yet back to the levels they could and should be.”

This Part C case was written by Marinella Padula, Australia and New Zealand School of Government, for Peter Thompson. It has been prepared for teaching purposes to update the cases 2008-90.1 and 90.2. The use of teaching materials is restricted to authorised persons only.

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¹ Kidd, P. ‘Rising HIV levels: why we should care and what we can do’ *Positive Living*, March 2007.

² Ibid.

³ Minchin, L. ‘Mystery over surge in Victoria’s HIV rate.’ *The Age*, 1 December, 2002.

Increased complacency about condom use was evident in the growing prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like chlamydia and gonorrhoea. The situation was especially serious in some remote Aboriginal communities where as many as 1 in 4 young women were infected with a sexually transmitted disease.⁴ Aside from the health and fertility risks these infections posed, people affected by STIs were also more susceptible to contracting HIV if exposed to the virus.

Young people were most prone to STI infection and those in their teens and early twenties had become sexually active in a post-HIV era where the media frenzy about the “AIDS epidemic” had diminished considerably. Australian teens were also engaging in a wider range of sexual behaviours with more partners at earlier ages. Young gay men no longer saw HIV as a death sentence and, unlike their older counterparts, were far less likely to have lost friends and partners to the illness. Elevated levels of drug use and binge drinking amongst adolescents were also blamed for an upswing in STI rates as such behaviours lowered inhibitions and compromised decision-making.

But not only the young were at risk. In the US, 15 percent of new infections were occurring amongst people over 50 – a figure that was expected to rise.⁵ These were often people who unexpectedly found themselves single later in life and, free from pregnancy fears, wrongly assumed that they didn’t need to use condoms. Some were not especially familiar with condoms or confident about their use because they hadn’t needed them in the past. Others mistakenly believed that their older partners were “safe”. Doctors were frequently uncomfortable about broaching the issue with their patients or simply didn’t think to ask.

Some felt the time was ripe for another Grim Reaper style campaign.

⁴ Edwards, M. ‘STIs 'hyper-endemic' in Indigenous communities’ *ABC News*, 4 February 2008, www.abc.net.au.

⁵ Katz, D. ‘Sex Ed for Seniors: You Still Need Those Condoms’ *US News & World Report*, 5 August 2007.

Exhibit 1: Number of HIV notifications in Victoria (1991-2006)#

Year	Number of HIV notifications
2006*	198
2005	286
2004	222
2003	225
2002	233
2001	218
2000	197
1999	140
1998	149
1997	188
1996	191
1995	179
1994	220
1993	235
1992	264
1991	317

* To 31 July 2006

Source: Media Release: Victorian strategy tackles rising HIV rates, Department of Health, October 6, 2006.