

Witness Seminar

The Politics, Policies and Ethics of HIV/AIDS: Past and Present

The Teaching Grid, University Library, University of Warwick

Tuesday 24th November, 2009, 10:00am - 5pm

HIV infection is now pandemic. Since 1981 it has killed more than 25 million people worldwide. The literature on HIV/AIDS grows apace, and along with the mass of archival and statistical data, as well as film and documentary productions, threatens to overwhelm the historian of medicine, science, and public health. How do we go about contextualising, reconstructing and conveying the multiple stories of the recent past and present?

One way to make sense of this past is to talk with those who have been involved, first-hand, in the struggle over the representation of HIV/AIDS, asking them about their experiences and recording their accounts for future research. A particularly specialized form of such oral history is the 'witness seminar', which brings together key figures to discuss, debate, and even disagree about their memories, ideas and views. The witness seminar was originally developed by the Institute of Contemporary British History, and was further developed in the history of science and medicine by the History of Twentieth Century Medicine Group, inaugurated by the Wellcome Trust in 1990. This regularly brings together clinicians, scientists, and historians to reflect on the contemporary history of medical science and practice.

Our SHAW witness seminar builds on this expertise, bringing together those involved in HIV/AIDS on different national and international levels, and drawing out their perspectives on how HIV/AIDS shaped and continues to shape individual, institutional, national and international politics and policies. We are interested as much in the professional aspect of their work as in the reasons for their personal commitment. What made them engage in the fight against HIV? What were and are their personal politics, and how have these changed over time and why? How did HIV/AIDS change individual societies and the international communities of nation states? Have they experienced a tension between their personal commitment and the need for organisation and institutionalisation? What do they think the future national/global impact of HIV/AIDS will be?

Individual presentations will be followed by a debate to which the audience will contribute. Students will record the sessions, and during the meeting we will discuss the possibility of publishing the presentations and discussions. Selected students will also - if participants agree - interview participants and videotape them. These students will have been trained in oral history interviewing with Professor Tilli Tansey, expert in this technique and convenor of the Wellcome Trust's History of Twentieth Century Medicine Group. The interview videos could then be made available on an internet video gallery for future research, as well as for members of the wider public interested in the politics and policies of HIV/AIDS in the past and present.

Participants included:

Dr José Arroyo (Department for Film and Television Studies, Warwick University)

Dr Eduard Beck (Senior Technical Officer, UNAIDS Evaluation Department)

Prof Roger Cooter (UCL)

Jason Crawford (Interdisciplinary Humanities Doctoral Program, Concordia University, Montreal, CA)

Prof Lucia F. O'Sullivan (Canada Research Chair in Adolescents' Sexual Health Behaviour, Department of Psychology, University of New Brunswick)

Sir Nick Partridge OBE (Chief Executive, Terrence Higgins Trust)

Lisa Power (Corporate Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Terrence Higgins Trust)

Dr William Spurlin (Director, Centre for the Study of Sexual Dissidence and Cultural Change, Sussex University)

Simon Watney (Crusaid)

Dr Rupert Whitaker (Chairman, Tuke Institute of Medicine)

Tony Whitehead MBE (Terrence Higgins Trust's first Chief Executive in 1983)