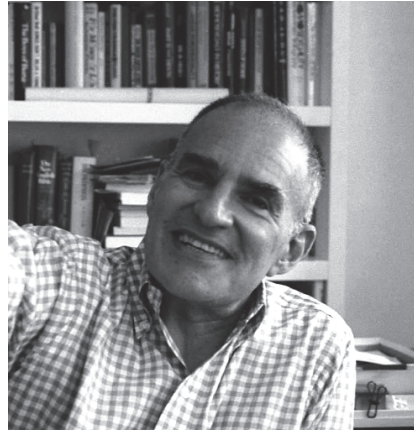


# **One Person Can Make a Difference**

**Larry Kramer vs. AIDS**

“All power is  
the willingness to  
accept responsibility.”

—Larry Kramer



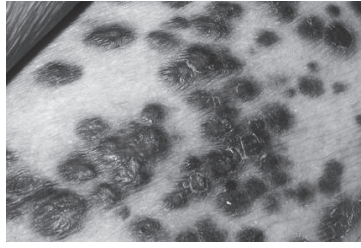
## **Picture sources:**

- Larry Kramer: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%C2%A7Kramer,\\_Larry\\_%281935-viv%29\\_-\\_foto\\_di\\_Massimo\\_Consoli\\_1989\\_VI\\_New\\_York.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%C2%A7Kramer,_Larry_%281935-viv%29_-_foto_di_Massimo_Consoli_1989_VI_New_York.jpg)

## **Essential Questions**

- What responsibility does the government have for ensuring the health and welfare of all citizens?
- What responsibility do individuals have for the welfare of others in society?
- How much influence should a government official's personal beliefs have on government policies?

## A New Disease



A patient afflicted by Kaposi's Sarcoma

- 1980–1981—The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta received reports of young men in California and New York suffering from Kaposi's Sarcoma and Pneumocystis Pneumonia
- Both diseases hadn't been known to afflict otherwise healthy young men
- The illnesses did not respond to treatments
- The only thing the patients had in common was that they were gay

In 1980, doctors in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco began to see young men, mostly in their 20s and 30s, who were suffering from diseases not usually found in young people who were otherwise healthy. Some of the men suffered from Kaposi's Sarcoma, a cancer that forms dark raised lesions on the skin. It is common among men over 60 of Mediterranean or eastern European Jewish ancestry, but rarely seen in other ethnic groups. Other doctors saw patients who had Pneumocystis Pneumonia, a rare form of the disease that usually only appears in people whose immune systems have been compromised by such things as taking anti-rejection drugs after an organ transplant. Pneumocystis pneumonia almost always responds to a course of antibiotics, but although these young male patients took antibiotics for weeks the pneumonia kept recurring.

Doctors were puzzled by these diseases appearing in otherwise healthy young men and became concerned as their patients began to develop one infection after another. Whatever was causing their condition was fatal, and within a year or two all these men died while their doctors stood by, helpless. The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, GA, which tracks diseases in the United States, discovered that the only thing these men in these different cities had in common was that they were gay. Because of this, the disease was first called Gay Related Immune Deficiency (GRID).

- 1982—Larry Kramer and several friends formed the Gay Men's Health Crisis organization to provide counseling, legal aid, volunteer assistance, and fundraising for AIDS research
- 1987—Three founding members—Paul Popham, Nathan Fain, and Paul Rapaport—died of AIDS



After seeing many of his friends die of this strange new disease, Larry Kramer, a New York writer, decided that he could not idly stand by anymore. Kramer was a novelist, playwright, and screenwriter who had graduated from Yale University. He held a meeting in his apartment that 80 men attended. All these men were gay and were horrified not only by what was happening in their community, but by the silence of the American government and the medical establishment's inability to offer any real help. Together, they formed the Gay Men's Health Crisis, which started out by offering help to men with AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), as the disease was now known. One of the men, Rodger McFarlane, ran a crisis hotline out of his apartment. Others delivered meals to those housebound by the disease. They accompanied men to doctor's appointments and social service organizations, and arranged for legal aid and counseling. What started as a grassroots movement eventually served the needs of over 15,000 men with AIDS. The organization also started raising money for AIDS research. In 1984, the Centers for Disease Control asked for the GMHC's help in organizing conferences on AIDS.

Of the six founding members of the Gay Men's Health Crisis, three died of AIDS in 1987.

## The Reagan Years



- 1980—Ronald Reagan elected President
- He was supported by conservatives and fundamentalist and evangelical Christian groups, including the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition
- He appointed some people from these groups to high-ranking positions in his administration

Ronald Reagan began as a radio, television, and movie actor of the 1940s and early 1950s. He was the President of the Screen Actors Guild during the McCarthy Era and cooperated with the blacklisting of actors who were suspected of being communists or communist sympathizers. He became a spokesman for conservative causes and supported Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater in 1964. In 1967, he successfully ran for governor of California and became famous for his hardline against student demonstrations on college campuses against the war in Vietnam.

In 1976, Reagan ran for the Republican nomination for president, but lost the nomination to incumbent president Gerald Ford. In 1980 he tried again, this time succeeding. Reagan was supported by conservatives who approved of his stance against high taxes, government regulations and spending, and *détente* with the Soviet Union and China. He advocated a strong military and building up the armed forces.

Although he rarely went to church himself, Reagan enjoyed the support of several Christian groups that became politically active in the wake of Supreme Court decisions that challenged many of their strongly held values by outlawing prayer in schools (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962) and striking down states' laws against abortion (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973). Reagan appointed several avowed conservative Christians to posts in his administration. James Watt, a Dispensationalist Christian, was appointed Secretary of the Interior; Gary Bauer, who later founded the conservative group American Values, served as undersecretary of education and an advisor on domestic policy; Pat Buchanan, a Catholic and hardline conservative who had worked as a speech writer for Richard Nixon, became Reagan's Director of Communications; and Dr. C. Everett Koop, a prominent opponent of abortion, was appointed Surgeon General.

## Responses to the Epidemic



- **Jerry Falwell, head of the Moral Majority**  
“AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals.”



- **Pat Buchanan, Reagan's Director of Communications**  
“...[Homosexuals] have declared war on nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution.”



- **C. Everett Koop, M. D., Reagan's Surgeon General**  
“Most of the people that surrounded Reagan ... believed that anybody who had AIDS ought to die with it. That was God's punishment for them.”

In the early to mid-1980s, most people believed AIDS only affected gay men. Many religious leaders and conservative politicians condemned the victims of the disease, stating that they had contracted it because of their “immoral” sexual behavior. In 1985, movie star Rock Hudson died of AIDS. Hudson had been a very popular romantic lead in films of the 1950s and 60s, appearing in many films and television shows as the love interest for many of Hollywood's most glamorous women. The American public was shocked by the news that he was gay. President Reagan, who had been friends with Hudson, stayed silent on the issue of AIDS, not even speaking the word publicly until 1986. In 1987, he gave his first speech addressing the epidemic right before an international conference on AIDS opened in Washington, D. C. The gay community felt that because the most visible victims of AIDS were gay, the government was reluctant to address the crisis. Funds for AIDS research often were among general cuts made in domestic spending. In 1986, with 10,000 cases of AIDS reported, Reagan ordered Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, the nation's highest health official, to write a report on the disease. Gary Bauer, one of Reagan's domestic policy advisors, and other conservatives feared that such a report would involve the administration in discussions of sex that would alienate the very people who were the strongest supporters of President Reagan. Koop's report treated AIDS as a public health issue, not a moral one, and was explicit in its descriptions of risky sexual behaviors and how to stem the spread of AIDS through the use of condoms. Koop also authored a pamphlet titled “Understanding AIDS” that was sent to every home in America, giving accurate information on the disease and dispelling many unfounded rumors about how it could be transmitted. Many conservatives attacked Koop for his frankness and his advocacy of condom use rather than abstinence, but he provided a valuable public health service when the nation badly needed it.

### Picture sources:

- Jerry Falwell: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jerry\\_Falwell\\_portrait.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jerry_Falwell_portrait.jpg)
- Pat Buchanan: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Patrickjbuchanan.JPG>

# Transmission of AIDS



Ryan White: hemophiliac



Earvin "Magic" Johnson:  
heterosexual sex



Elizabeth Glaser–blood  
transfusion



Intravenous drug users can get AIDS  
from sharing contaminated needles

Daughter Ariel–infected  
mother-to-child  
transmission through  
breast feeding

While AIDS first appeared in the United States in the gay community, by the mid-1980s the disease had spread to those who hadn't engaged in gay sex. Ryan White, a 12-year-old hemophiliac, got AIDS from the blood products he used to make his blood clot normally. When he was diagnosed in 1984, his Indiana school expelled him because parents were afraid that their children could catch the disease from him through casual contact. His parents sued the school to get him readmitted and White's fight made national headlines. He became a spokesman for better education about the disease. He died in 1990, a month before Congress passed the Ryan White Care Act, which gave financial assistance to AIDS patients who had exhausted all their other resources.

Elisabeth Glaser, wife of actor Paul Michael Glaser, became infected with AIDS through a blood transfusion she had when giving birth to her daughter. In the period before she was diagnosed, she had unknowingly transmitted the disease to her daughter Ariel through breastfeeding and to her son Jake while she was pregnant with him. She founded the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation when she found out that the antiviral drugs given to adults with AIDS had not been tested or approved for their effectiveness or safety when used by children. She and her husband testified before Congress on the need for more drug trials aimed at children and she also spoke at the 1992 Democratic Convention, calling for more federal funds for research and more compassion for those with the disease. She died of AIDS in 1994.

AIDS was also showing up in people who injected themselves intravenously with illegal drugs such as heroin. From the experiences of people like Ryan White, Elizabeth Glaser, drug users, and others, doctors determined that AIDS could be spread through blood as well as through sexual intercourse.

In 1990, Earvin "Magic" Johnson, the popular star point guard of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team, admitted that he had contracted the AIDS virus through having affairs with a number of women. Johnson's case illustrated that AIDS could be transmitted during heterosexual sex as well.

## Picture sources:

- Ryan White: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ryan\\_White.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ryan_White.jpg)
- Magic Johnson: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Magic\\_Johnson.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Magic_Johnson.jpg)

# The Normal Heart

- 1985—Larry Kramer’s play *The Normal Heart* premiered at New York’s Public Theater
- The play focused on the early days of the AIDS epidemic and the impact the deaths of friends and lovers had on a group of gay men
- It also recounted the founding and early days of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis

“*The Normal Heart* was never meant to be a subtle work. Larry Kramer wrote it in 1985 to be a shock to the system, an alarm siren, a blunt instrument to bludgeon Ed Koch's New York, Ronald Reagan's Washington, the indifferent press and complacent medical industry into acknowledging the mysterious disease destroying gay men.”

—Newsday review

Kramer turned to art to help people understand the human side of the AIDS epidemic—the people behind the statistics. His autobiographical play *The Normal Heart* opened at the Public Theater in New York City in 1985. The play tells the story of New York writer Ned Weeks and his fight to increase awareness of a mysterious disease that is killing off gay men in New York City. Dr. Emma Brookner, a polio survivor who is confined to a wheelchair, decries the medical profession’s lack of knowledge faced with the new illness, and she encourages gay men to abstain from sex for their own safety, as no one even knows how the disease is spread. Ned forms an organization to deal with the crisis, but as hundreds of men die—including many of Ned’s friends—the press and the city’s government ignore the epidemic. Ned clashes with others in his organization, who find his style too confrontational and fear that he is angering the very people they are trying to get to support their cause. In the meantime, Ned has fallen in love, but his boyfriend, Felix, starts showing symptoms of the disease. Dr. Brookner becomes an activist herself as reports start coming in about the disease appearing in other countries and other groups of people, including heterosexual couples. She delivers a passionate speech against those who stand by while an epidemic takes the lives of homosexuals, already a group seen as outcasts by the government and society. At the end of the play, the numbers of HIV/AIDS deaths are shown as the lights fade out.

The play enjoyed much critical acclaim and was also produced in Los Angeles and London.



# Act Up



Scenes from a 1989 ACT UP  
“die-in” protest in San Francisco

- 1987—Kramer formed ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) to demand more extensive action against the disease
- 1987—Held several demonstrations to condemn minimal government subsidies for AIDS research and lack of access to experimental drugs
- 1988—Occupied the NY Stock Exchange to protest the high cost of AIDS medication (\$10,000 per year)
- 1988—Shut down the Food and Drug Administration because of its slow process for approving new AIDS drugs
- 1990—“Day of Desperation” held, in which banners were displayed in Grand Central Station in NYC that read “Money for AIDS, not for War” and “One AIDS death every 8 minutes”

In 1984, Dr. Luc Montagnier of France discovered the virus, later named HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), that caused the disease. In the years that followed, blood tests were developed that could detect the virus. These tests allowed people to be diagnosed before they actually got sick from the disease. With the new test, blood that tested positive for the virus could now be isolated from those used for transfusions, or to make blood clotting products for hemophiliacs. As the test became more widely used, there were fewer cases transmitted through contact with infected blood.

Although the discovery of the virus and tests to detect it helped slow the spread of the disease (as did encouraging the use of condoms), progress was much slower on finding treatments, a cure, or a vaccine. One drug, AZT, seemed to slow the development of full-blown AIDS in those infected with HIV, but cost \$10,000 per year, a price most AIDS patients couldn't afford. Larry Kramer, fed up with what he saw as the tyranny of the drug companies and the inaction of the government, formed ACT UP, an organization dedicated to direct action that would bring public attention to the problems faced by those with the disease.

## A Letter from Larry Kramer



"Thank you for coming to see our play.

Please know that everything in *The Normal Heart* happened.

These were and are real people who lived and spoke and died...

Four members of the original cast died as well...

Please know that AIDS is a worldwide plague.

Please know that there is no cure.

Please know that after all this time, the amount of money being spent to find a cure is still miniscule....

Please know that here in America case numbers continue to rise in every category. In much of the rest of the world—Russia, India, Southeast Asia, Africa—the numbers of the infected and the dying are so grotesquely high that they are rarely acknowledged.

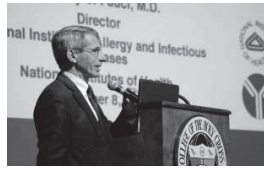
Please know that most medications for HIV/AIDS are inhumanly expensive and that government funding for the poor to obtain them is dwindling and often unavailable.

Please know that an awful lot of people have needlessly died and will continue to needlessly die because of any and all of the above.

Please know that the world has suffered at the very least some 75 million infections and 35 million deaths. When the action of the play that you have just seen begins, there were 41."

In 2001, Larry Kramer was diagnosed with end stage liver failure brought on by a hepatitis B infection he had suffered years before. Because he was infected with the HIV virus (although he did not suffer from full-blown AIDS), he was denied a liver transplant. Kramer protested, claiming that the reason for excluding HIV patients—that they had not long to live in any case—was no longer valid because new drug treatments were extending their lives. In December 2001, Kramer was able to receive a liver transplant. His life and health improved considerably after he recovered from the operation.

In 2011, *The Normal Heart* was revived on Broadway and won the Tony award for best revival of a drama. Kramer continued his fight against the AIDS plague, as he called it, by passing out a letter to audience members in which he reminded them that everything in the play was based on real people and real events.



Dr. Anthony Fauci, Head of AIDS research, National Institute of Health



Kramer at an ACT UP event

“ACT UP put medical treatment in the hands of the patients. And that is the way it ought to be... There is no question in my mind that Larry helped change medicine in this country. And he changed it for the better. In American medicine, there are two eras: Before Larry and After Larry.”

In 1992, Kramer's play *The Destiny of Me* was produced off Broadway. It picked up the story of Ned Weeks where *The Normal Heart* left off. The play was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for drama and won two Obies (the prizes given to off-Broadway productions) as well as the Lortel Award for Outstanding Play of the Year.

In 2009, he was the honorary Grand Marshal of the Gay Pride Parade, in recognition of his work with Gay Men's Health Crisis and ACT UP.

Kramer lives in New York, where he is completing his latest work, *The American People: A History*, which he has been writing since the early 1980s. It is a history of gay people in America.

Kramer's efforts have been credited for increasing public interest in health care policies in this country, how those policies are crafted, and how they affect the lives of ordinary people. His advocacy for HIV/AIDS patients has also changed the way medicine is practiced. As Dr. Anthony Fauci, who clashed with Kramer frequently in the early days of the AIDS epidemic but is close friends with him now said, “In American medicine there are two eras: Before Larry and After Larry.”

Kramer continues to speak out for those with HIV/AIDS. He persists in his battle against governments who do too little to encourage and fund research, a public that seems sometimes to have moved on to other causes, and drug companies that charge too much for drugs and have made little progress on the search for a vaccine.