

Profile

Bruce Richman: building the U=U movement for HIV prevention



“Being gay meant facing the loss and terror of HIV/AIDS”, says global health advocate Bruce Richman when speaking about his formative years during the 1980s and 1990s in the New England region of the USA. It was a time when HIV/AIDS began extending its dark shadow worldwide and Richman was navigating his own sexuality while seeing news about healthy young men suddenly succumbing to this new disease. His early experiences shaped the role he has today as founder of the Prevention Access Campaign (PAC), a non-profit organisation that launched, with partners, the Undetectable=Untransmittable (U=U) movement to build a scientific consensus on the fact that people living with HIV who are on antiretroviral therapy and have an undetectable viral load cannot sexually transmit HIV. Richman’s drive and passion have encouraged leading infectious diseases experts, national and international health agencies, and advocacy organisations to endorse the message and recognise U=U’s fundamental role in ending HIV/AIDS.

The skills Richman brings to his advocacy for U=U partly developed over a career that included launching and running a lifestyle magazine, achieving a masters in education at Harvard University, USA, and starting a youth violence prevention programme in the USA. He also graduated from Harvard Law School and worked briefly in international capital markets. But it was in 2003 that a life-defining moment influenced his future path when Richman found out he had HIV. “I was depressed, terrified of passing on the virus, and closed off from love and relationships”, he recalls. Richman went on to create the Inspired Philanthropy Group to help individuals and companies have a positive impact in the world, including efforts to reduce HIV stigma and support HIV-affected communities in Uganda and Rwanda. Richman’s “self-stigma” and “fear of transmission” started to lift in 2012 when his doctor told him after a scare with a broken condom that it was impossible for him to pass on HIV because his viral load was undetectable. “I was thrilled and filled with hope but also outraged—why wasn’t everyone talking about this?”, he explains. Richman began contacting HIV experts and learning about the science, including researchers from pivotal studies that confirmed zero transmissions from HIV positive partners who were undetectable. To gather the evidence into one clear message he mobilised scientists and activists to join him in forming PAC in 2015.

Richman’s global coalition of experts and advocates then released a consensus statement in July, 2016, coining the phrase “U=U”, and targeting the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the US National Institutes of Health, UNAIDS, and other leading agencies to update public health information about the transmission risk. “Yet despite the science on U=U being clear, it was hard for some vested

interests to let go of decades of outdated fears”, he says. Since then the U=U message has taken hold. Richman is in awe of today’s U=U movement that involves more than 1000 multi-sector partners in 105 countries, with advocacy and communications led by communities and health ministries on every continent. He is clear that “not sharing U=U is not only a violation of human rights and medical ethics, but also a wasted opportunity to reduce stigma and improve HIV treatment and prevention”. The US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria now require that recipient countries include U=U education in their core programmes. The UN adopted U=U in the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS. Richman worked with WHO on a policy brief released at IAS 2023, making it clear that an undetectable viral load poses zero risk of sexual transmission of HIV. He is currently working with the US CDC on an implementation and scale-up guide for U=U. “The science is the same for U=U everywhere, it’s how to adapt the message to local contexts and remove the social, structural, and legal barriers that might exist to education and implementation”, he explains.

Richman will continue to campaign until U=U is established in all countries and reaches all groups, including women and young people who are disproportionately affected globally. He believes ending the HIV epidemic can only be achieved by intensifying focus on people with HIV who are not on treatment, and supporting them to reach an undetectable viral load to stay healthy and stop transmissions. “Investing in the wellbeing of those with HIV benefits everyone”, he says. “And the sooner that U=U is integrated into all HIV guidelines, the training of medical professionals, and public health communications worldwide, the closer we will get to ending the AIDS epidemic.” Richman’s activism has brought key leaders and international agencies in global health fully onboard with U=U, empowering people with HIV to live and love without fear of transmission. “The U=U message is transformative for people living with HIV; it removes fear of sexual transmission, encourages people to test, engage in care, and to start and stay on treatment, but most importantly it dismantles HIV stigma”, says Alison Rodger, Professor of Infectious Diseases at the Institute for Global Health, University College London, UK. “Bruce often says science doesn’t have a publicist, but with U=U he led a paradigm shift in the field of HIV prevention. I believe that U=U is the most influential, powerful, and life changing campaign for people living with HIV since the start of the epidemic, and that it remains the foundation to ending the epidemic. But none of this would have been possible without Bruce.”

Tony Kirby



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