

Dr. Bret Rudy: Reflections During Pride



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Walking through the streets of New York City in June is always inspirational. The flags flying outside many establishments in celebration of Pride are a great demonstration of support for the LGBTQ+ community. It was not that long ago that Pride flags only flew outside of restaurants and bars catering to the LGBTQ+ community. Similarly in health care, we are seeing many more programs established to focus on the special health needs of this broad and diverse community.

You may have read recently about our [Family Health Centers' work in promoting pre-exposure prophylaxis \(PrEP\)](#) in our community—the dedication of the team featured in this story was inspiring. The rapid growth of our PrEP program and an increasing focus on [multi-disciplinary offerings](#) to meet the needs of the LGBTQ+ community are a testament to many years of research, advocacy, and investment aimed at improving access and care. It is good to look back at how we got here.

In the 1990s, when there were only two or three antiretrovirals to treat HIV, a study was conducted to see if the use of a single antiretroviral medication could stop the transmission of HIV to a baby from a mother who was infected. Infants infected through perinatal transmission had even fewer options for therapy. The impact of HIV on these infants was devastating. The protocol was complex, but each institution developed a strategy for implementing the study as part of a national clinical trial. The success of that study led to many subsequent studies resulting in less complex regimens with far fewer risks of toxicity. Today perinatal transmission to infants in the United States has been largely eliminated.

But it took years before chemoprophylaxis was considered to stop HIV transmissions in other communities. I was at the meeting in Washington, DC, where Dr. Anthony Fauci, former director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), endorsed starting pre-exposure prophylaxis studies in the US—one of those profound moments you remember in your career.

Then came the next hurdle. In the US, the epidemic was spreading in young LGBTQ+ individuals, especially in communities of color. Initially, there were no plans to conduct studies in individuals under 18 years old, the population most at risk and most vulnerable. The road to getting youth into targeted studies was complex, but, eventually, the study was conducted through the Adolescent Trials Network. We worried about enrolling youth, but we found youth eager to participate. They had seen firsthand the impact HIV had on their communities. The sites conducting the study were well established in their communities, creating the trust so critically needed. The oversight of safety was intense, as it should have been. Every lab value, every bone density evaluation, etc., was reviewed to ensure even minor abnormalities were not cause for a safety concern. In the end, the study demonstrated, just as in adults, pre-exposure prophylaxis was effective. This led to the approval for use in 15- to 17-year-old adolescents.

I reflect on the lessons learned often, many of which are relevant today:

- We must never underestimate the work it takes to get new therapies and treatments to our patients. But we can never let that stop us. We must never

allow the most vulnerable to be left out.

- Safety must always be front and center. The principles that guide safe clinical research are the same principles that guide our approach to safety in our hospital every day. Our focus on improving the lives of our patients must always consider safety first.
- We must always look for ways of improving our processes to better care for our patients. The work can be challenging but the effort is always well worth it.

In Brooklyn and across our health system, we are fortunate to work with colleagues who view Pride, and everything it stands for, as more than a month-long observance. Through medical and surgical care, advocacy, advisory councils, and much more, individuals across our organization embody the spirit of Pride every day. Thank you for creating an inclusive environment where we all belong and delivering high-quality patient-centered care to all both during Pride and throughout the year. Happy Pride!