

Shining My Personal Light on Vaccine Trials on HIV Vaccine Awareness Day – Op-Ed

I have long known that the best hope for ending AIDS, the deadliest pandemic in human history, is the development of an HIV vaccine. Historically, vaccines have been the most powerful weapon against infectious disease. But, it wasn't until recently that I realized I could contribute to ending the AIDS epidemic by volunteering for an HIV vaccine research study.

When I learned that I could be a part of the search for an HIV vaccine, I thought I was the perfect candidate. I understood the basic science behind HIV vaccine candidates and the clinical research process. I am young, healthy, scientifically literate, and passionate about volunteering to help fight AIDS. I thought my savvy friends, family, and colleagues, many of whom are scientists, public health workers, and medical professionals, would be overwhelmingly supportive of my decision. I was wrong.

I decided to volunteer for an HIV vaccine research study at the National Institutes of Health about a year ago. My own family and friends thought I was crazy. Several people assumed I was HIV positive. Others worried I would contract HIV by participating. Most tried to talk me out of it or treated me differently once I told them.

Turns out my social network isn't alone; lots of Americans are in the dark about HIV vaccine research. A survey conducted by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease found that only 28% of the general population is supportive of someone they know volunteering for an HIV vaccine trial. I witnessed first hand the troubling lack of basic knowledge among the general public about HIV vaccine research which is prohibiting support, perpetuating myths, and fueling stigma.

Currently, there is no HIV vaccine, but finding one is an essential component in the fight against AIDS. Amidst the current scientific and political debate about the future of HIV vaccine research, we cannot forget an HIV vaccine's potential. An HIV vaccine cannot give you HIV, and the safety of trial volunteers is always the top priority of HIV vaccine research. Some candidates are going fail, but their trials hold valuable lessons, bringing scientists closer to success.

I had to overcome my own fears to participate in an HIV vaccine research. I had to learn the facts and place trust in the research doctors and nurses as well as fellow volunteers (tens of thousands of people have volunteered worldwide). I had to endure some flu like symptoms and many visits to NIH's vaccine research clinic.

To me, it was worth it. I feel as though I have not only contributed to science, but to human kind. In my 25 years of life, few other commitments have been as meaningful or rewarding. I know that I am making a difference.

I dream of the day when HIV/AIDS will no longer devastate families and communities throughout the world, infecting millions of people each year. When we are living in a world without AIDS, I will know that I was part of the solution.

I hope that my experience will inspire others. Vaccine research science cannot advance without the support of people like us, people from all walks of life. There is something everyone can do to end the AIDS epidemic by each one supporting HIV vaccine research, something as simple as seeking information about HIV vaccine research efforts or learning more at www.bethegeneration.org or www.niaid.gov. May 18th is HIV Vaccine Awareness Day. Take this opportunity to talk about HIV vaccine research with your family and friends, support a trial volunteer, or contact your local trial site to participate or join a community advisory board. Millions of lives depend on our involvement. Please join me.

Anna Ford, AIDS Action, Washington, DC, and HIV Vaccine Trials Participant