

# Research on the Activities of the ‘Teen Task Force’

– AIDS Education at a High School in New York, USA –

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## ‘Teen Task Force’ によるAIDS教育

～米国ニューヨーク州の高等学校の場合～

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### 要 旨

まだ病名が付いていなかったHIV/AIDSが、1981年、アメリカで最初にメディアに報じられた時は『Medical Mystery (メディカルミステリー)』として騒がれていた。

丁度その頃、多久和は1981年～1982年にかけて米国ネブラスカ大学にバスケットボール留学、成山は1980年からオレゴン大学に居て、当時まだ名前もない原因不明の奇病に取り組む医師団が、宇宙服のような防護服を着てビニールカーテンの中で治療にあたっている様子を現地のニュースで見っていた。この病気がAIDSと病名付けられたのは1982年である。

その数年後、世界AIDSデー参加のために来日したHIV感染者やAIDSを発症した人達が、日本の入国審査場で入国を拒否された事件は、インターネットの無い時代であったが即座に世界中に流れた。本報告は、そのようなHIV/AIDS 流行開始時期の1980年代を振り返ってみた。

**Keywords:** Youngsters, HIV/AIDS, preventive education, volunteer action

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## Introduction

Since the initial media reports about AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) and HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) infection, our understanding of AIDS and the importance of AIDS education in schools have increased dramatically. However, back in the late 1990's when Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama performed their research, AIDS as a disease was far less understood. Some of the statistics of the period (mid 1990's) are outlined in the following paragraphs.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that as of 1997 there were a total of 30.6 million people who had been infected by HIV and who were being treated for AIDS. The organization also estimated that cumulative number of AIDS patients since the epidemic began was 12.9 million, of which 11.7 million had already died of the disease. There were estimates at that time that 16,000 new people were infected each day. WHO also estimated that at least a million of all HIV-positive individuals worldwide were children under the age of 16, and that 90% of these individuals lived in developing countries.

In 1996, it was calculated that approximately 9 million children under the age of 16 had lost their mother due to AIDS. 90% of these AIDS orphans resided in Africa. At that time, WHO estimated there were approximately 23 million HIV patients the world over, and that 60% were male and 40% were female. At that time, WHO predicted the number of HIV patients would exceed 40 million during the 21st century.

During 1996 about 1.5 million people died of AIDS, with approximately 350,000 being children under the age of 16.

The theme for World AIDS Day for 1997 was "Children Living with AIDS," and the theme for the 10th anniversary convention the following year was "Force for Change: World AIDS Campaign with Young People."

In 1996, although the causes of AIDS infection were not as well understood as today,

what was known was that the rate of infection of AIDS was somewhat lower in countries that offered instruction on HIV/AIDS prevention than in countries that did not. This fact motivated Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama to have a close look at AIDS education, and in particular upon activities for preventing HIV/AIDS among high school students in the United States, which at that time was having some success with its AIDS education strategies.

### **Abstract of the 1998 Study**

This paper focuses upon a survey of the activities of the ‘Teen Task Force,’ a volunteer group at two high schools in the United States. An important objective of the high schools studied was to stimulate awareness of AIDS through volunteer activities. Students were encouraged to ‘take action to protect their own lives.’ These activities attempted to educate students about AIDS and how to prevent its spread, and to promote a recognition that AIDS is a problem that affects them personally. Such activities are rarely observed in Japanese schools.

The explosive increase in HIV infection in the United States of a few years ago has now been significantly reduced. It is generally accepted that education about AIDS the prevention of its transmission, and, in particular, the practical applications of such education, have had an important contribution in helping to slow down the spread of the disease.

The rate of HIV infection in Asia, on the other hand, is on the rise. This alarming trend, which is in opposition to that observed in the USA, stresses the need to develop measures to protect the future of teenagers in our schools.

A sustained approach to AIDS education, an approach that evolves with the increased understanding of the disease, needs to be incorporated to the conventional teaching style in Japanese education in order to protect our future generations.

### **Time and Place**

The study was conducted during March 1998 at M.V. High School and N.R. High School in New York State

### **Method**

Members of the volunteer group 'Teen Task Force', an AIDS education group operating at the two high schools, were interviewed about their activities.

### **Historical Background**

AIDS was first reported in America In 1981. During that time, Fuminori Takuwa was studying at the University of Nebraska and Koichi Nariyama was studying at the University of Oregon. This was when AIDS was first reported upon in America. The disease initially had scientists baffled, and, as a result, it caused a huge stir in the media. Images of physicians working behind plastic curtains on patients in intensive care rooms occupied television screens day after day. The disease was also a popular topic of radio call-in shows.

The disease was named "AIDS" the following year in 1982. Misunderstandings about the new disease and the public hysteria generated by such ignorance were common in 1982 and 1983. During that time, for example, a well-known newscaster suggested that because AIDS was rarely reported among people of Asian decent, that the ethnic group must have some kind of natural immunity to the 'puzzling' disease.

That was 26 years ago. Since then, AIDS education has come a long way. Many myths, such as the kind of natural resistance in Asian people suggested by the newscaster in the preceding paragraph (something that now seems ridiculous in retrospect), have been debunked. Asian peoples in the United States have been shown to have social systems, both at work and within the family unit, that have a significant bearing upon AIDS transmission within their group. Ironically, 'Let's act like Asians,' a strategy that emphasizes the importance of the family unit in AIDS education, is now an important part of many AIDS educational frameworks in the United States.

Magic Johnson, one of America’s greatest basketball players, became one of America’s greatest AIDS ambassadors when he made a full public disclosure about his own AIDS and how he got the disease. He said at a press conference he went public because he wanted the young people of America to recognize that anybody --not just certain individuals -- could be infected with HIV. He stated that he never even thought once of HIV when he was still in school.

The story connected with Magic Johnson brought AIDS into the mainstream media. Since then, AIDS prevention and education have undergone some important changes.

World AIDS day, held on December 1st every year, shows how the perception of AIDS education has progressed. The themes employ keywords such as communication, youth, women, AIDS, action, family, rights and children.

When Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama were doing their research in New York in 1998, the theme for World AIDS day was “Force for Change, World AIDS Campaign with Young People.” The emphasis of the 1998 theme was to teach young people about how to protect themselves against infection.

### **Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama Discuss AIDS Education in the United States in 1998**

Effective ways to educate young people about HIV/AIDS prevention in the United States in 1998 centered around “activities involving the students themselves” and “meeting directly with AIDS patients and people who are HIV-positive to discuss the disease.” The objective was to raise interest and awareness of AIDS by getting students to join volunteer groups and call on each other to “protect their own lives while helping others.”

## **The Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama Study of AIDS Education M.V. High School and N.R. High School in New York State**

USA high schools consisted of a 4-year program, and, as a consequence high school freshmen in the USA were the same age as their counterparts in 3rd year of middle school in Japan. Other differences between the US high schools and Japanese high schools were also noted as playing a factor in AIDS education. The US schools typically implemented a vertically segmented class system, where students of different ages are educated about AIDS together. For these reasons, Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama felt that education was more challenging in the USA than in Japan.

Interest in AIDS in the high schools Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama looked at was promoted through the use of skits, posting slogans created by the students on the school grounds, and holding contests for the best T-shirt or poster design for AIDS day. These activities made students aware that AIDS was a disease that had the potential to affect them personally.

There were other activities the students participated in as well. In particular, Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama were interested in the 'Teen Task Force', a structure that had been implemented at the high schools they were studying. Examples of the activities of these volunteer groups included giving speeches, putting on skits, placing slogans created by members around the school, and participating in demonstrations for World AIDS Day or school festivals.

One of the main focuses of the 'Teen Task Force' was to educate students on preventing HIV infection. Class discussions centered upon such things as "passing up opportunities to have a sexual experience" or "putting off sex as long as possible". Yet the discussions were not just about abstaining from sex, and students were taught that when the time came for sexual experience after becoming an adult, one needed to "be sure not to forget to take actions to protect your self."

## The ‘Teen Task Force’ and the Civil Service

Leaders of student volunteer groups were civil servants of the city rather than instructors at the school. The PTA (Parent Teacher Association) did not want the school to be directly connected with AIDS education because of the many differing opinions regarding family education and religious principles. In the USA, when instructors receive negative backlash from guardians of students, instructors can easily be fired by pressure from the PTA. The PTA in the USA, however, has no power to dismiss municipal civil servants, and this was provided as the reasoning behind using such public employees as leaders for the volunteer groups. Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama noted that the PTA system in Japan was different and did not have the same kinds of roles in affecting government decisions.

Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama found that many parents did not approve of the volunteer groups when they were started. Many families, for instance, were “opposed to activists providing their children with guidance about sex, regardless of the fact that they were volunteer activities.” It seems that such parents were persuaded into accepting the ‘Teen Task Force’ on AIDS initiatives after being informed the activities were connected with the Red Cross. It was also mentioned that participation in such activities would help when preparing letters of recommendation students applied various universities and colleges.

## The ‘Teen Task Force’ and the Reasoning of its Volunteer Base

A few of the comments obtained in interviews conducted by the author concerning their motives for participating in the ‘Teen Task Force’ are provided below.

- 1) I decided to participate when a classmate who had become pregnant consulted with me. (Female student)
- 2) I decided to participate when I heard that a single male high school student had infected 27 girls with HIV. (Female student)
- 3) Because a girl in my neighborhood was an AIDS patient. (Female student)

- 4) Because I sensed the need for such activities. (Male student)
- 5) Because there were a lot of female students in the group. (Male student)
- 6) Because I wanted to learn a lot more stuff about the disease. (Male student)
- 7) Because my sister is an AIDS patient. (Female student)

## The 'Teen Task Force' and Some of its Slogans

Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama were particularly interested in some of the slogans created by the Teen Task Force. These slogans helped define how AIDS was transmitted, thereby letting students know how they might protect themselves against infection. The slogans also provided a better understanding of the nature of the disease and how HIV-positive individuals and AIDS patients deal with the disease. Here were some of the slogans they encountered:

Cindy R.

You are the only one who can and will take care of you! You have many Choices in life, and it's up to you to decide what you want to do. You can say "no" and you can "wait."

Shawyn H.

Do you love your life? Respect yourself. Protect yourself.

What is the rush? Wait, before it's too late.

You can get a new man. You can't get a new life. Love safely.

Iris B.

I gave him my love and he gave me HIV.

No love without a glove (No sex without protection).

The only thing to big for a condom is an ego.

No man is too much for a condom. It's all in his head

Donald P.

See Dick. See Dick with a fox.

See Dick with no love socks.



Don't be a Dick.

Chris D. (Teen Taskforce President)

For every act there is a consequence.

AIDS has no color. AIDS has no religion. AIDS does not discriminate.

## **Comments about AIDS Education in High Schools in 1998 in New York, USA**

Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama made the following observations about the general AIDS education of high school students in the USA:

In 1981, when it was first reported that AIDS was a disease of unknown origin, due to various misperceptions, schools in the US did sense a need for AIDS education in the current form, and, consequently, the start of full-scale AIDS education was delayed. Many young people infected with the disease passed away during this time.

During the initial stages of AIDS education in the USA, the focus is about its transmission and infection, placing emphasis on how to prevent infection. The latter stages of AIDS education switch the focus to how to cope with the disease, or “living with HIV/AIDS.”

An important objective of such teaching was to stimulate concern about HIV/AIDS and call on young people to “take action to protect their own lives” through volunteer activities related to AIDS. In other words, “being concerned about AIDS” was an important component of the American educational system.

## **Comments about AIDS Education in High Schools in 1998 in Japan**

Fuminori Takuwa and Koichi Nariyama concluded their paper with the following observations about the general AIDS education of high school students in Japan in 1998:

Information about prevention of HIV/AIDS began to be seriously disseminated in

Japanese schools in February 1987. There was a lag of 2 years between when the when the first HIV-positive person Japan was announced (1985) and the implementation of the AIDS prevention program. It took until January 1987, when the first AIDS patient in Japan died of the disease, before students started to be informed about how not to get the disease. It is important that we do not forget this procrastination. Sustained action will be needed to ensure AIDS education in Japan is integrated into the conventional Japanese teaching style. Japan can no longer assume that “well, I won’t get infected” is an acceptable approach in its educational strategies.

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