There has been one rather dramatic emergent disease in our lifetime: HIV. It came at a time when we thought that we had defeated most infectious diseases. Many people would like to dismiss the importance of the HIV pandemic; they see it as something that does not affect “people like me,” and that, therefore, it is a myth that heterosexual AIDS exists. Obviously, that point of view is ludicrous.

HIV has utterly defeated us as a public health community. It has overwhelmed the planet. It now exists in every country in the world. It has made its way into continents well after the whole world knew what it was, how to prevent it, and how individuals should protect themselves. Nevertheless, we have been utterly unsuccessful in stopping this virus’s relentless surge across the world.

SOCIAL IMPACT OF AIDS AND OTHER DISEASES
One of the realities that I have seen firsthand, and those who have looked at HIV in the developing world have undoubtedly seen, is the devastating social impact this disease is having. I am reminded of a photograph of a group of Tanzanian children, accompanied by an adult. In fact, the “adult” was only 19 years old at the time the picture was taken; the rest of these children were orphans. In one village in Tanzania, a 19-year-old adolescent was the elder raising all the other children, because all the adults in the village had died of HIV. This

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sort of thing is not uncommon. I have been in villages in Africa where no adults are left except the very elderly, which in African terms means people in their 40s and 50s, and the post-adolescent adults that one hopes are not already infected.

There are wild estimates of the numbers of orphans created by HIV. The US Agency for International Development has estimated that 355 million orphans will be in Africa by the year 2000. That roughly translates to 11% of all under-15-year-olds on the sub-Saharan parts of the continent.

There is also a clearly increasing infant mortality due to the death of the mother, father, or both, with a 15% increase in Zambia in infant mortality between 1984 and 1994.

In the US, the epidemic of HIV and other epidemics of bacterial diseases, tuberculosis (TB), and others are driven by a different set of social factors. Clearly, crack cocaine, which entered New York City in 1985, roughly, and the rise in heroin use in our society have played a very crucial role in the emergence of a variety of diseases. We tend to focus on HIV because it is so obvious. If you inject a virus into your bloodstream, you will get a disease. But several other diseases are associated with intravenous and crack cocaine smoking use, and they are associated in ways more complex and more difficult to confront.

We have tried desperately in this country to control our drug epidemic. Every president in my adult lifetime has declared a war on drugs in the US. Every president and every Congress have passed laws that increase the expenditures for arrests and drug control. Yet, it is very clear that narcotics, cocaine, and illicit drug use continues to rise in our society. It rises not just out of a sense of social alienation or out of the stereotyped communities. In fact, the majority of intravenous drug users are white and are men.

I think that much gets missed because people look for the stereotyped drug user patients, which often translates into looking for African-Americans from Harlem. A great deal of disease gets overlooked.

Many diseases are associated with the drug use environment. For example, about 6% of all the people incarcerated in New York City in the 1920s had malaria associated with injecting heroin or opium, and it was discovered that, by cutting the product with quinine, heroin dealers eliminated the problem. In fact, there are a variety of ways that it seems those who deal in and distribute drugs in the streets of New York, Chicago, and Houston are wiser than the infectious disease specialists. They seem to know that they are dealing in dangerous products, not just directly toxic, but also with secondary dangers. They do not want their clients to die. It is not in their interest, just as it is not in the interest of most