

New US Epidemic mpox—Same Old Discriminatory Politics and Bureaucracy for the LGBTQ+ Community (Updated December 2022.)

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The Numbers

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), two cases of mpox (formerly known as monkeypox) were reported in 2021 in the US, one in Texas on July 15, 2021, and one in Maryland on November 16, 2021. The first case of mpox in 2022 was reported in Massachusetts on May 18, 2022. By early August 2022, there were a total of 7,510 cases reported in the US. By the end of 2022, 30,000 mpox cases were reported in the US, including 19 related deaths as well as 80,000 cases worldwide! Most cases were in gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex. As of October 2022, 99% of people with mpox were gay men, 57% of whom were HIV infected. Black people accounted for 44% of US mpox cases. Once again, Black people are the largest share of reported cases as is the case with COVID-19 cases.

The Vaccine

How did two cases in 2021 jump to 30,000 cases in 2022 when there was a known vaccine, manufactured by Jynneos, without serious side effects. (It should be noted that there is another smallpox vaccine, ACAM2000, that was deemed to cause too many side effects to be used.) Why didn't the federal government jump in immediately with both feet given what we know about the US COVID-19 epidemic and the horrors the LGBTQ+ community has experienced from the US HIV/AIDS epidemic. mpox, like other infectious diseases, has the risk of spreading exponentially.

I have repeatedly heard the stigma excuse being used for the federal government's failure to act more quickly and effectively. To be sure, stigma is paramount consideration when the LGBTQ+ community is involved, especially where epidemics are concerned. We have definitely passed this way before. But it is no reason not to respond expeditiously and effectively given all the attendant circumstances.

Admittedly, as usual, there were a number of bureaucratic challenges present. First, Jynneos vaccine is for smallpox vaccine. mpox is in the smallpox family. Smallpox vaccines are controlled by the federal Strategic National Stockpile (SNS). Although smallpox has been eradicated, vaccine doses are controlled by the federal government for use in case of biological warfare. The federal government only initially released **2,400 vaccine doses for use by the entire country** which equates to dosing for 1,200 people as the vaccine requires two doses per person spaced four weeks apart, before or after exposure.

The US had an agreement with a company in Denmark that manufactures the Jynneos vaccine, but the FDA needed to inspect the facility in Denmark before the vaccine could be shipped to the US. Although the FDA did conduct the necessary inspections earlier than planned, they did not begin until the week of July 4, 2022, after most of the June Gay Pride celebrations were over.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) did not declare mpox a national Public Health Emergency until August 6, 2022. LGBTQ+ advocates had been urging HHS to make the required Emergency Determination well before August. It was not until August 18, 2022 that HHS finally made the additional Emergency Determination requirement that would permit the FDA to grant Jynneos an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) that would make the vaccine widely available to the public. The federal government also did not facilitate a new agreement between the Danish Jynneos vaccine maker and an American drug manufacturer to produce the Jynneos vaccine in the US until August 18, 2022.

While all this bureaucratic nonsense was impeding progress, mpox was percolating throughout the Gay Community like wildfire all summer. Again, 7,510 were reported by the CDC on August 6, 2022. mpox cases had increased by 4,743 from the previous two weeks, with a daily average of 400 cases and an 82% increase in cases! I wonder how long it would have taken if the majority of cases were in White straight men!

One could argue that the US government worked as quickly as possible. But very interestingly, mpox vaccines were available widely in Canada at this time. Vaccinations were even available for anyone who wanted one at tables outside the International AIDS Conference in Montreal from July 27 through August 2,

2022! What's wrong with this picture! Same old, same old when it comes to the Gay Community in the US!

Let's look at what happened in Maryland. Based on its caseload, Maryland was initially allocated 682 Jynneos doses. Vaccinations were not readily available to the thousands of people who wanted to be vaccinated. Eligibility criteria were established to parse out the vaccine very slowly until more doses were available. It was the COVID-19 situation for gay men all over again. People with HIV (PWHIV) were again at the back of the queue for COVID-19 vaccines! Here we go again!

Maryland received 6,405 vaccine doses for our second allocation. Baltimore City, Prince George's and Montgomery Counties each received 200 doses each. Doses were being held back by the State in case there became known risk to other populations! So, gay men have the highest known mpox risk, but Maryland decided to hold back doses in case other demographics became at risk of transmission! Sound Public Health policy directs using vaccines to target infectious disease outbreaks in the populations who are at greatest risk for illness. Instead, Maryland had only confusing and complicated after exposure criteria initially eligibility categories as a result of the lack of enough vaccine to go around without any consideration of PWHIV! We made this same exact mistake with PWHIV and COVID-19 vaccinations! Ask yourself again, would this have happened to White straight men?

The Treatment

The only currently accepted mpox treatment is called Tecovirimat, also known as TPOXX. Like the Jynneos vaccine, TPOXX is for smallpox, and was initially not approved for mpox. You guessed it, more bureaucratic insanity. The only way to initially obtain TPOXX before it received EUA was by participation in a complicated CDC clinical trial process.

Physicians who wanted to prescribe the drug needed to sign up to become investigators in a clinical trial, sending in résumés and informed consent forms signed by mpox patients—a process that is labor intensive and virtually impossible for most doctors, especially many doctors who treat Black and Brown people. If this wasn't such a dire emergency, it would make a very good bureaucratic joke. Unfortunately, the joke was once again on the Gay Community.

As outlined above, even after HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra signed the Emergency Declaration for mpox, he failed to provide FDA with the necessary power to grant the EUA for mpox treatment until weeks later. HHS took both steps at the same time during the US COVID-19 epidemic.

The Aftermath

On November 28, 2022, the World Health Organization changed the name monkeypox to mpox. This is an extremely important strategic step given today's climate of racism, stigma and hate speech. Everything we can do to reduce stigma and promote linkage to care and treatment is essential to the public health, especially in the area of infectious diseases. AIDS Action Baltimore and other members of the HIV community have applauded the WHO's positive action and welcome this important name change.

HHS renewed the national Public Health Emergency for mpox on November 2, 2022, but decided to end the mpox Emergency Declaration on December 2, 2022. According to the CDC, after over 30,000 cases of mpox and 19 deaths in 2022, mpox cases are waning. US cases peaked at more than 400 per day during the summer of 2022, but are now less than 10 per day according to the CDC tracker. But there is no guarantee case numbers won't increase again.

HHS states that 1.1 million doses of the two-dose vaccine have been given in the US. The CDC recommends vaccination for people who are at risk. I wonder how many of those 30,000 cases could have been prevented if vaccine implementation would have been as streamlined in the US as it was in Canada. How many of those 30,000 people could have been spared the excruciating pain that usually accompanies mpox? After all these years, have we learned nothing, or are gay men once again disposable! The federal government has failed gay men in yet another epidemic!

Gay people are not the only people impacted by mpox. Increasingly throughout the US epidemic, Black and Brown people were disproportionately affected by mpox. The CDC also recently reported that the most severe cases of mpox occur in people who are Black, living with advanced HIV and homeless.

The mpox outbreak has once again very clearly demonstrated that the US Public Health System is in shambles. Things were bad enough before COVID-19, but are

even worse now in so many jurisdictions. No new money was allocated to Health Departments to provide mpox services. HIV money was used for mpox purposes! What happens if mpox cases begin to increase? New money needs to be allocated for any mpox case increases or any other new infectious disease outbreaks. How many more times are we going to be unprepared for the next new infectious disease? Strategic plans need to be developed to address any new outbreaks that may come our way.

Please see the accompanying article on mpox—What Do We Know? What Do We Do? (Updated in December 2022.)

<https://www.aidsactionbaltimore.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/mpox-What-do-we-know.pdf>