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April Tantillo

President Bush's historical legacy is being hotly debated in the media right now. One of the bright spots appears to be the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Indeed 1.4 million patients have received antiretroviral medications paid for by the United States since the implementation of this program in 2004. This is compared with 50,000 people who received these medications from the U.S. before PEPFAR. The main point of PEPFAR is to provide AIDS prevention and treatment to 15 nations in Africa and the Caribbean. It was announced at the 2003 State of the Union address by President Bush, who said that \$15 billion dollars would be committed to the cause over five years.

According to UNAIDS, 38.6 million people were HIV-positive in 2005, 4.1 million were newly infected, and 2.8 million people died from AIDS worldwide in that calendar year. This is a problem of pandemic proportions, one that cannot be solved with money and medication alone. Reducing HIV-related deaths will require creative, culturally sensitive solutions.

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Among some of the most important criticisms of PEPFAR is that the program is too restrictive. Bush's plan requires one third of funds for prevention to go towards abstinence-only education. The harm that is done to women and children by suggesting that they have the autonomy to insist on abstinence is clearly demonstrated by the high rates of HIV in these populations. According to the World Health Organization, women make up 60% of HIV infected individuals in Sub-Saharan Africa. This alarming trend occurred as a result of an imbalance of

power, money, and opportunity that makes abstinence education not only a waste of time but also an insult to the situation of women and children. If women had the right to make decisions about their sexual lives and health, abstinence education could possibly have a place in Africa.

According to the PEPFAR website, funds can only be used to support condom use for those people considered to be most at risk of HIV transmission, not for the deliberate spacing or prevention of births alone. This provision forces organizations to keep funds for family planning separate from funds for HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention. Much like the Global Gag Rule (which does not apply to PEPFAR funds), the provision against the promotion of condom use forces recipients of funds from PEPFAR to work with one hand tied behind their back.

While Bush's plan is a step in the right direction for AIDS treatment, it falls short on prevention. True prevention will only be possible when the situation of women is improved and they are empowered to make decisions in their reproductive lives. Sadly, politics and religion are preventing Bush's "legacy" from having the impact that it otherwise could have had.

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