

## **PREFACE**

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HIV/AIDS has become the biggest threat to human survival in the last 700 years. Important gains made in child health and life expectancy in the Americas are being threatened by this epidemic which is destroying many of the efforts and investments of past decades.

A generally silent but harmful added effect of the epidemic is discrimination against people who live with the virus. Discrimination derives from the understandable fear of a virus that is transmissible, incurable, and potentially deadly. But it also has other deeply rooted causes. Among them is prejudice against those groups that were hardest hit during the early stages of the epidemic, such as men who have sex with men, sex workers, and drug users.

Does such discrimination also occur within the health services? If so, how serious are the consequences? Prior to this publication, we did not have precise answers to these questions. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive study of the origins, manifestations and impact of HIV-related discrimination in the health services. It also offers recommendations for identifying and eliminating discrimination on the basis of HIV status.

Health workers need all the support we can give them for the difficult task of caring for people with HIV and AIDS. Some need help to overcome their own prejudices. Others may need assistance in dealing with fear, coping with the stress of caring for the very ill, and preventing the emotional detachment that can occur among those who look after patients dying of AIDS. Caregivers also deserve the necessary training and resources to ensure that the risk of accidental transmission of the virus is kept to a minimum.

Conversely, we need to show special appreciation to the many doctors, nurses, laboratory workers, and other health personnel who joined the fight against the epidemic in its early stages. Their courage, altruism, and commitment to a public health mandate were larger than the danger of infection or risk of alienation from their own colleagues.

The example set by these pioneers is proof that health workers are destined to play a leading role in both the community and society in building a supportive, nondiscriminatory environment for people with HIV. We dedicate this publication to them.

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