

Aids and HIV have been known for decades, but how much have attitudes changed in that time. Our head of programmes Joanne Wilson explores the history of stigma and looks at where we are now.



A group advocating Aids research in New York in 1983 (AP Photo/Mario Suriani)

By [Joanne Wilson](#)

Looking back 20 years, 1996 was the year I sat my GCSEs. The era of Britpop – you were either a Blur or Oasis fan, which was then rudely interrupted by the attitude of Girl Power and the five faces of the Spice Girls.

I wore baggy jeans, Doc Martins and political message t-shirts. Tom Cruise was dominating the cinemas screen with catch phrases such as ‘show me the money’ from Jerry Maguire to special effects and rubber faces in Mission Impossible.

Educating people

My school sex and relationship education was memorable for the wrong reasons. A lesson from the GUM nurse made one of my friends turn visibly green when watching a slide show – well overhead projector – of warty penises!

The school invited me to attend the local HIV hospice along with professionals from local sexual health, Aids/HIV and social care agencies to plan [World Aids Day](#) events. I returned to school armed with the facts, red ribbons and eagerness to challenge stigma in my own school:

- HIV is passed on through infected bodily fluids such as semen, vaginal fluids, blood, breast milk and rectal secretions.
- The most common ways HIV is transmitted are through sex without a condom and through sharing infected needles, syringes or other injecting drug equipment.
- You cannot get HIV through casual or day-to-day contact, or kissing, spitting or sharing a cup or plate.

Breaking down barriers

Last year, you might have [read my other personal recollections of wearing that red ribbon](#) each year and I wonder how much has changed? Most people diagnosed with HIV have a normal life expectancy. About 100,000 people are living with HIV in the UK. Treatment for HIV has advanced tremendously but public attitudes are lagging behind.

Some of you may have watched a video clip last Tuesday, probably on social media. It is a concept we could have only imagined in 1996 – as Microsoft launched Internet Explorer 3.1. It was of a choked up Barack Obama, the retiring US president, [presenting Ellen DeGeneres with the Medal of Freedom](#). 'It's easy to forget now just how much courage was required for Ellen to come out on the most public of stages 20 years ago', he said of her coming out as gay.

He said her bravery was important not only for the LGBT community, but it also helped 'push our country in the direction of justice'.

I remember watching the '[puppy](#)' episode as it was called and the ensuing media reactions. Sadly this brought the end of Ellen as a sitcom with only one more season commissioned. The audience just weren't ready.

If President Obama is right, then times are changing. And as I look forward to Christmas with my wife and two gorgeous adopted boys (a demonstration of legislative change at least), I am grateful for the bravery of Ellen and others who also challenged stigma and discrimination.

Wear the ribbon and reduce stigma

Being diagnosed with HIV today means something different than it did 20 or 30 years ago. HIV is no longer a death sentence. But people's attitudes can make living with HIV hard. Some things from the 1980s and 1990s are worth revisiting, but Aids and HIV stigma isn't one of them. It's time to end the stigma.

So on the 1 December, pin your ribbon on and be brave. Not only to show your support and solidarity to the millions of people living with HIV, but as a visible challenge and commitment to end stigma.

Let's hope when in 20 and 30 years we look back to 2016, while it will no doubt still have its fashion and music faux pas (dare I mention X-factor's Honey G?) you might recall the part you played in building inclusive communities.

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