

COMMENTARY**Comment****Dean Follmann** 

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Common themes from the AIDS and COVID-19 pandemics are reviewed from the vantage point of a statistician at the National Institutes of Health.

For COVID-19 as for AIDS, statisticians have had a major role in both understanding and countering the pandemic. I found the article by Ellenberg and Morris a fascinating read that touched on familiar challenges for both AIDS and COVID-19 invoking both a sense of nostalgia and the opposite. Both pandemics required new techniques to be developed to understand the disease in order to craft study designs and methods of analysis to identify treatments and vaccines. Beyond these features, I felt common elements for both pandemics were uncertainty about the dimensions of the disease, controversy, and a sense of urgency to combat a new and scary infectious threat.

As the AIDS epidemic was exploding, a community of activists developed to prod and confront what they felt was an indifferent government and a doctrinaire medical establishment. Confrontation is not comfortable but sometimes inevitable. I directly saw a siege on the campus of the National Institutes of Health by activists countered by police on horses and a die-in right outside the buildings where we worked. It was uncomfortable but to their great credit, different scientific leaders actively listened to and responded to this pain and anguish with thoughtful changes in how clinical trials were conducted. I remember in particular a statistical workshop organized by the NIH statistician Susan Ellenberg. It was not a typical workshop. Activists were an integral part of the workshop, passing flyers, serving on panels, and part of the discussion. These interactions ultimately led to a rethinking of how clinical trials could be conducted.¹ But I think a bigger lesson was the ability to learn directly from people afflicted with the disease and that it was better to engage than hide.

Forty years later, another pandemic explodes. The COVID-19 response has been intense with new studies being designed and conducted at an incredible and relentless pace, all in the face of incomplete knowledge about a mysterious disease, controversial in a different sort of way. The cadence demands that decisions be made quickly, guided by instinct but supported by a sense of comradery. As detailed by Ellenberg and Morris, while tremendous progress has been made against COVID-19 in an incredibly short amount of time, the next stage of the pandemic is not at all settled. Nonetheless for COVID-19 as for AIDS, the methods of science will be applied and new approaches will be crafted to best understand and counter this evolving threat.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

n/a.

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REFERENCE

1. Byar DP, Schoenfeld DA, Green SB, et al. Design considerations for AIDS trials. *N Engl J Med*. 1990;323:1343-1348.

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