

It was the start of summer 1981.

President Ronald Reagan was in the first few months of his term of office.

Lady Diana Spencer's fame was on the rise with her impending wedding to Prince Charles.

The space shuttle Columbia had flown for the first time just two months prior.

And, on June 5, the Centers for Disease Control's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report featured an article on strange cases of rare cancer among gay men.

Today, both President Reagan and Princess Diana are no longer with us. Even the space shuttle Columbia is no more. But the specter of HIV/AIDS, first heralded in that CDC report, continues to haunt the world after 25 years.

It certainly didn't seem like a big deal at the time. A small article in a government report about an unusual form of cancer among a small population. Even the mainstream media didn't pick up the story for another month, when *The New York Times* ran a front-page article.

Now, after 25 years and millions of deaths around the world, that small article was a harbinger of the devastation to come.

The numbers alone are staggering: more than half a million dead in the United States, more than all of the Americans killed in World War II; more than one million Americans infected with HIV, one-third of whom don't even know they are infected; more than 22 million dead worldwide.

Despite those statistics, we have made some progress in the last 25 years. Education and prevention efforts, including correct and consistent condom use and needle exchange have helped to reduce the spread of the virus. New medications now help keep people with HIV healthy for many years. Much of the panic and fear that accompanied the early days of the epidemic have faded as knowledge has increased.

However, that progress is not enough. Every year, 40,000 Americans are infected with HIV. African-Americans, Latinos and women continue to see skyrocketing infection rates. New infections among gay and bisexual men are on the rise again. Government funding for services continues to remain flat despite an increasing number of HIV cases.

Life-prolonging HIV medications are expensive and have severe side effects. And, for now, patients who go on the medications are on them for life. They are literally on permanent chemotherapy.

Stigma around the disease continues to hamper efforts to effectively combat it by making it a secretive topic that is not discussed openly and honestly.

And, sadly, death rates for AIDS have begun to rise again after nearly a decade of decline.

Certainly, there is some cause for hope that we will not have to mark 50 years of HIV/AIDS. Promising new medications are in development. Clinical trials of vaccines are underway around the world.

But, for now, there is no cure and there is no vaccine.

There are, however, many resources to help everyone learn how to protect themselves.

Whitman-Walker Clinic offers free HIV counseling and testing at our Elizabeth Taylor Center in northwest Washington site, our Max Robinson Center in Anacostia and our Northern Virginia facility in Arlington. We also have mobile testing units that go into the community and provide HIV testing and education to populations at high risk.

We provide education about HIV and how to prevent infection. We can even provide condoms, lubricant and dental dams.

And we “wraparound” our clients a range of medical and social support services to treat not just their HIV disease but other issues that may complicate effective treatment. These services range from medical and dental care to mental health care and addictions treatment to nutrition assistance to legal assistance to case management and day treatment services.

And, while we accept insurance, Medicaid, Medicare and other forms of payment for services, no one is turned away for their inability to pay.

Whitman-Walker Clinic has been here from the very start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Over the last 25 years, we have built a model of competent, compassionate and effective care for our clients.

As we reflect on a quarter century of HIV/AIDS, we can't help but think of our lost friends: Dusty, Sunnye, Larry, Gene, Bill, Robert, Stewart, Charles, Richard, Hank and all the others too numerous to name. We remember their service to Whitman-Walker Clinic and we continue to feel their absence.

And we hope that within the next 25 years we can finally celebrate the end of this great human tragedy.