



In Our View: AIDS Vaccine Trial Raises Serious Questions

February 25, 2003

What Determines Success: Effect on Whites or Blacks?

Large Trial Finds AIDS Vaccine Fails to Stop Infection

Vaccine for AIDS appears to work

AIDS vaccine fails test, though effort is lauded

On February 24 the three headlines above appeared in the *New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Star-Ledger* (Newark, NJ) respectively. All three associated articles focused on the results of the first full scale human trial of the AIDS-VAX vaccine. Results from the trial indicate that though the vaccine failed to protect whites, it appears to be effective for Asians and Blacks.

So now what? Will development of the vaccine be discontinued or slowed because it is ineffective in treating whites? Will public support diminish because only minorities appear to benefit?

The headlines from the *New York Times* and the *Star-Ledger* seem to infer just that. Both papers used headlines that suggest that the vaccine trial was a failure primarily because it failed to treat whites effectively. The *USA Today* headline takes a more positive approach, citing the overall results of the test while pointing out the nuances of the trial results. All three papers took a more expansive approach in the body of the related articles.

However, it is the front page headlines, and the perspective of the papers regarding the success or failure of the vaccine trials, that are disturbing. To the casual reader two of these papers seem to be making pretty strong statements regarding the value they place on whites versus Blacks by their interpretation of the test results. How can three papers cover the same story and arrive at fundamentally different conclusions, at least in the manner in which they treated the story in their headlines?

This may sound like nitpicking but there are some pretty serious consequences for the Black community. In an era when fewer Americans are reading, and rely heavily upon television sound bites and ideologically driven talk radio for news and information,

headlines substitute for substance. The “quick hit” in the form of sensational and misleading headlines often competes with the talking head chatter over the airwaves in an environment where tabloid reporting is supplanting serious journalism.

And in the case of coverage of the AIDS vaccine trial there is a lot at stake. AIDS is devastating the Black community, affecting the heterosexual and gay population, and impacting young women in particular. In this crisis any positive developments in the area of a vaccine or treatment should be pursued. Given the global implications of this disease for our community, trials such as that conducted for the AIDS-VAX vaccine should be closely monitored, and when demonstrating some success, demands must be made for continued testing.

Whether that happens is heavily dependent upon the public’s reaction, influenced greatly by what it reads, hears and sees regarding the trial results. If the message is subliminally communicated that the determination of success is solely dependent upon the impact on one subset of the population, specifically whites, wide scale public support will not be forthcoming if the outcome does not meet that criteria. Given these recent headlines, it is a safe bet that many whites view the recent AIDS vaccine trial as a failure. Why? **Because the results for whites were not encouraging.** And two credible newspapers, and we suspect many more, said so by the manner in which they framed their coverage.

We are certain that this will not be the last time we see this discrepancy in reporting. However, in many instances the stakes may not be so high. In this situation it is truly a matter of life and death for the Black community. Twenty years ago crack infested our community and has wrecked havoc on an entire generation, causing irreparable harm and creating a subterranean existence for a generation to come. Shortly thereafter AIDS emerged, only to gain safe harbor in the Black community because it was dismissed as a gay disease. Now we find it on our doorstep.

And skewed reporting will not help the situation.

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