

1993

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Recommended Citation

Stephen R. Graubard, *The Anthony Perkins Saga*, 9 J. Contemp. Health L. & Pol'y 177 (1993).
Available at: <https://scholarship.law.edu/jchlp/vol9/iss1/14>

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THE ANTHONY PERKINS SAGA

Stephen R. Graubard

Michael Kirby was enormously influential in helping plan and create two special issues of *Daedalus*, published in the spring and summer of 1989 entitled: "Living with AIDS."¹ These volumes, subsequently published as a book by MIT Press,² were wonderfully received by the critics who commented on the volumes' extraordinary range and depth. Kirby's contribution, in addition to his own essay, "AIDS and Law,"³ was to advise the editor and his fellow-authors how to develop a study that would not be narrowly parochial, that would not dwell exclusively on the specific features of the pandemic particular or peculiar to the United States. Aspiring for a more ample perspective himself, he pressed others to do the same in their own essays.

Kirby's contribution to the *Daedalus* study opens with two paragraphs, as significant today as they were in 1989.

AIDS is hard; hard on the patients who learn the grim news; hard on the health-care workers, who have only a limited armory of therapies and no vaccine or cure in sight; hard on the scientists, working at the edges of knowledge, always under the pressure of a major catastrophe affecting millions of people in virtually every land; hard on lawmakers struggling to bring the cumbersome, imperfect machinery of legal control to bear effectively on intimate personal behavior, which must be modified quickly if the spread of the epidemic is to be slowed. And prejudice and hatred, fueled by fear, are always close at hand.

There are limits on what the law can and should do in response to AIDS. It never ceases to surprise me how otherwise intelligent people (including some lawyers) assume that when society has a problem, all it needs to do is make some new law and the problem will be solved. They assume that people will modify their conduct to avoid criminal punishment or civil liability.⁴

1. *Living with AIDS*, 118 DAEDALUS No. 2, Spring 1989; *Living with AIDS, Part II*, 118 DAEDALUS No. 3, Summer 1989.

2. *LIVING WITH AIDS* (Stephen R. Graubard ed., 1990).

3. Michael Kirby, *AIDS and Law*, in *LIVING WITH AIDS* 375 (Stephen R. Graubard ed., 1990).

4. *Id.*

Unlike others in the public arena who imagine that it is their own discipline—whether it be law, medicine, political science, public health or education—that is all-important, and that their contributions will ultimately matter; there is no such suggestion of imperial academic or professional ambition by Kirby in his essay. The proposition that there are limits to what the law can in fact do, that the dimensions of the AIDS problem are greatly exacerbated by “prejudice and hatred, fueled by fear,” shows a keen and exact appreciation of the individual and social roots (and consequences) of a situation tragic in every dimension.

The recent death of Anthony Perkins, a victim of AIDS, led *The New York Times* to publish a remarkable interview with his widow, Berry Berenson, describing in very considerable detail the trauma of Perkins' last years.⁵ The interview is both distressing and disconcerting, for what it tells us about the stigma of AIDS in American society, but also for what it tells us about the mass media, and perhaps most importantly, that uncommon social commodity called friendship.

We are told that Anthony Perkins kept silent for two years because “he simply never wanted anyone to know.”⁶ Why not? In a word, he was afraid to do so. He feared unemployment, and perhaps a great deal else. Speaking to his sons, eighteen and sixteen, in his last days, he gave what is in effect his final testament. He told them: “I chose not to go public about this because to misquote ‘Casablanca,’ I’m not much at being noble, but it doesn’t take too much to see that the problems of an old actor don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy old world.”⁷ His widow told more about those last days and months, of his having chosen to go to the hospital for treatment under an assumed name, of why he felt compelled to conceal his identity, and the demeaning effects both on him and on her of such calculated subterfuge.

Had he been more courageous, some would undoubtedly have rallied round; others would have taken their distance; still others, perhaps the greatest number, would simply have used the tragedy as a subject of gossip, wondering with the mass media how Perkins had in fact become infected, how he had acquired the disease. Perkins, increasingly angry at the prospect of his imminent death, and looking with new eyes on the Hollywood world in which he had lived for the greater part of his life, said he learned “more about love, selflessness and human understanding from the people I have met in this great adventure in the world of AIDS than I ever did in the

5. Bernard Weintraub, *Anthony Perkins's Wife Tells of Two Years of Secrecy*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 16, 1992, at C15.

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

cutthroat, competitive world in which I spent my life.”⁸ What a comment on a profession—that of acting! What a comment on a city, a society, a nation!

Some of the anger, his widow explained, reflected his dismay at being unemployed for long periods, at this having been the case years before he became infected with the AIDS virus. But some of the anger had to do with the fact that he had become type-cast; his great success as the star of Alfred Hitchcock’s “Psycho” gave him his fame; it also made others want to employ him only in such roles. That detail, while interesting and revealing, is less significant than those provided by Ms. Berenson on how her husband came to view Hollywood, on the doubts she herself feels that had he told individuals of his HIV-positive condition, that they would have sympathized with his plight and offered him work. Some wish to insist on that after the fact; his widow clearly remains unconvinced.

Though the entertainment world has been long known for its large homosexual population, and though Ms. Berenson makes every effort to avoid criticizing that world, she notes that only a few Hollywood stars—individuals like Elizabeth Taylor—have in fact been ready to support the campaign to confront and deal with the AIDS problem. Most have preferred to dwell on other matters, finding the whole question too sensitive.

The story of how rumors on Perkins’ HIV-positive condition first began to circulate, and what the effects were on the family is a chilling one; more significant, however, is what it tells us about America’s prying free press, anxious always for news intended to titillate, even if only for a week, a month. It appears that *The Enquirer*, a tabloid, better described as a “rag,” first broke the story about Perkins’ being HIV-positive. Perkins was given a series of blood tests in Los Angeles for a palsy on the side of his face. His widow assumes that someone tested his blood for the HIV virus, found it, and “leaked” the information to *The Enquirer*. After the story appeared, Perkins was again tested, and the virus was indeed found.

Ms. Berenson, devastated by the news, and very naturally worried both for her children and herself, was tested four times in two years for the virus; she had, in fact, not contracted it. After her husband’s sixtieth birthday, she insisted that he share the news with a few intimate friends; it was impossible for her to continue to live with the secret. Meanwhile, the tabloids continued to pursue them. Berenson says: “They haunted us like vultures.”⁹ She goes on to say: “They were horrendous, following my housekeeper to her

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.* at C17.

home or the supermarket,"¹⁰ always prying, snooping.

This interview deserves great reflection. How a society treats an HIV-positive individual will do very little in most instances to hasten his or her death, though it can indeed cause even greater psychic suffering, and not only on the part of the patient. The effects on the family, in all too many instances, and particularly with married individuals, can be scarcely less devastating. While social callousness, by itself, will not significantly impede the ongoing research looking for a "cure" for the disease, it does shed a curious light on American society, supposedly liberated, free of all manner of inhibiting Victorian prejudices on the subject of sexuality and sexual practices.

The press—and perhaps not only that part of it dismissed as "tabloid"—imagines that its vaunted "investigative reporting," and the public's right to know everything about the private lives of celebrities, excuse any excessive ardor in finding the facts. *The Enquirer* was not only interested in knowing that Perkins was HIV-positive; once the newspaper knew that, it wanted to know a great deal more. How had Perkins contracted the virus? Was he in fact bisexual? Had he been promiscuous? Did he have a long-time lover? The lives of celebrities are supposed to be open. To demand discretion—to suggest that not all the details of an individual's life need to be revealed, that the public has no "right" to know—is to go against what is claimed by many today to be the "freedom" of the press.

Such "freedom" was not thought necessary in other societies that were more civilized, more civil, perhaps more free. When Winston Churchill's father, Lord Randolph Churchill, was wasting away in the last months of his short life, many suspected that he had contracted syphilis and was dying of the disease. The rumor existed in the society. There was no need for *The Times* (or the first of the tabloids, the penny press) to advertise the fact. Laws of libel perhaps restrained them, but they were restrained also by the knowledge that not everything that touches the life of a prominent person needs to be advertised and made public.

The issue of what news is "fit to print," what news needs to be printed, what consideration ought to be given to private grief, and not only of the individual, but of family and friends, is one that we too often choose not to address. Still, it would be a mistake to make *The Enquirer* the chief or only offender in this sordid contemporary mass media tale. The more serious matter, certainly, is what the interview reveals about social fear in American society, why the stigma of AIDS remains so powerful, why even a coura-

10. *Id.*

geous individual like Anthony Perkins cannot confront certain realities, knowing the terrible price he and his family are likely to pay for candor.

It is foolish to pretend that "stigma" can be eradicated, that it will in fact be ended by greater individual tolerance and public understanding. Until the United States begins to accept its own late-Victorian mores on many issues, and not only on sexuality, it will never understand its racial problems, nor for that matter, the one that touches us all, the inevitability and dignity of suffering and death. So long as violence is thought to be "normal," so long as it remains the principal feature of our "entertainment" industries, so long as lethal weapons remain in the hands of children and adults, including many who know themselves to be "normal," we will never begin to understand the deep prejudices that infect our society.

The Perkins saga will not help scientists discover a cure for AIDS. It will not even lead many who are rich, and the greater number who are not, to open their purses or their hearts. It may, however, do something that is more important—recognize that AIDS is not a divine punishment, but a God-given opportunity for a society that wishes to believe itself humane to show those qualities, and not only in respect to those suffering in hospitals, hospices, and at home from a dread disease.

