

Symposium Articles

Reflections on Advocacy as a Foundation of Global Health Law

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Abstract

Law can function and act on norms, through legislation, regulation, treaties and the like. Law can also be a key accompaniment to activism. The career of Larry Gostin represents both aspects of the law in achieving social change.

Keywords: AIDS; human rights; activism

It is hard to overstate Larry Gostin's role in the AIDS pandemic. Many of our first generation of AIDS warriors are now long gone; there are not many heroes left who worked to fight this plague since its start in the early 1980s. While I am not a lawyer or legal scholar, I spent most of my life as an AIDS activist, working alongside fellow activists from marginalized communities at risk of the disease, where the rights of people living with HIV were not — and still are not — simply subjects for an academic exercise or scholarly pursuit. Larry has spent his life in some of the same struggles for human dignity, rights, and justice that AIDS activists fought for on the streets.

There are two kinds of lawyers I have come across over these decades: there are movement lawyers working with social movements and then there are institutionalists, mimicking the outside/inside strategies of activists but working from inside the structures of our most august institutions — to make change from within. I think of Larry as the consummate institutionalist, but one with his ear to the ground, who always listened to what was going on outside the room as he helped to craft laws, policies, and practices inside of them.

And after all these years of the ups and downs against AIDS, I have come to appreciate the sustained, constant work of enshrining rights in laws and regulations. It is in embedding our rights in these civic structures that makes them harder to roll back than the often concessionary, fleeting victories we have obtained from politicians, drug companies, and other leaders around the world.

It is impossible to review Larry's contributions to the field of HIV/AIDS, but as the late, great historian of science and medicine Elizabeth Fee has said in reviewing Larry's book on *The AIDS Pandemic: Complacency, Injustice, and Unfulfilled Expectations*: "His is a voice of wisdom and compassion, backed by a wealth of knowledge gathered from decades of research and engagement." Reading Larry's book will give you a sense of the scope of his work — over the years and across almost every critical issue in HIV and human rights.

Larry has now taken on another fight — one that pits him against another feared plague, COVID-19 — which has again found him alongside the AIDS activists he has known so well for most of his career. In the COVID-19 response, Larry joined with activists from around the globe in what was perhaps a more activist-inspired and aspirational mode: the push for access to COVID vaccines in the Global South. The fight for vaccine equity is where institutions failed, and billions of people were left without even one dose of a vaccine that many of us take for granted. In this continuing fight, Larry has devoted his life to institutional, structural change, but he also understands that at some point, you need to get up from the table, walk out of the room, and protest.

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