



## 'Silence = Death:'

What single-payer  
advocates can learn from  
AIDS activists

*Featuring Michael Lighty,  
Healthy California Now*

## *This time on Code WACK!*

**In honor of Pride month, we're examining LGBTQ activism in health care.** How did the HIV/AIDS crisis devastate the community and what pushed many members toward militant activism? ***What can the Medicare for All movement learn from AIDS activists?***

To find out, we spoke with **Michael Lighty**, president of the [Healthy California Now](#) Coalition, and former constituency director for Bernie 2020.

## *SHOW NOTES*

## **WE DISCUSS**

***AIDS killed more than 324,000 people in the U.S. between 1987 and 1998 alone. What can you share about the early days of the pandemic and its impact on the community?***

"The word that comes to mind is devastating. Certainly gay men of my age and older, in some cases, in many cases, lost everybody they know, literally, every friend they had died.

"... it was defining for a whole era of gay men and lesbians, frankly, because many people with AIDS were taken care of by lesbians.

"And it wasn't limited to gay men, certainly. There was a whole set of IV drug users who were exposed. There were people who were exposed who were partners of IV drug users, and ultimately, HIV/AIDS became a devastating disease in communities of color...

"...I think it's really an era-defining experience for gay men, but the impact of it is literally global." - **Michael Lighty**

***In the face of the government's refusal to respond for many years, the community was galvanized into action. What can you tell us about AIDS activism and ACT UP?***

"ACT UP was a profound movement, not unlike ... the reproductive rights movement, the women's movement, the movement of midwives and so it wasn't like the first time that people, you know, tried to take control of the healthcare system in a sense and of their own health care. But it was at that moment quite significant, because of course, health care was evolving into an industry....

"...it was both a militant movement against the government and the pharmaceutical industry primarily demanding treatment and access to care..."

"It was this combination of really smart, graphic symbolism, like Silence Equals Death and it was international."

"So it became, [an] advocacy movement that was both graphically creative, ... sophisticated politically, ... militant politically ...." – **Michael Lighty**

### ***What can the single-payer movement learn from HIV/AIDS activists?***

"... what we have to never forget is that militancy and creativity matter. So Silence Equals Death was a very defining slogan of ACT UP.

"... whether you're immune compromised, as I am, in dealing with COVID, if you're quiet about it they're just going to let you...potentially die because everyone else has moved on.

"If we are silent about the need for comprehensive reproductive health services, we're not going to get them.

"And if we are silent about the, you know, rapacious and murderous behavior of insurance companies while they profit somewhere around \$31 billion last year with much of their revenues from public taxpayer sources, if we don't challenge that, it's going to continue." – **Michael Lighty**

# Helpful Links

[The AIDS epidemic's lasting impact on gay men](#), *The British Academy*

[Who Is at Risk for HIV?](#), *HIV.gov*

[AIDS and the Arts: Behind the Scenes of a Tragedy](#), *Los Angeles Times*

[How AIDS Activists Fought for Patients' Rights](#), *History.com*

[Artists Advocating for Human Rights During the HIV/AIDs Epidemic](#),  
*Albion College*

[Out of the Closet and Into the Trenches: Gay Male Baby Boomers, Aging, and HIV/AIDS](#), *The Gerontologist*

# Episode Transcript

Read the full [episode transcript](#).

# Biography: Michael Lighty

**Michael Lighty**, President, [Healthy California Now](#), has organized, advocated and developed policy for single-payer, Medicare for All nationally and in California for over 30 years.

He is a founding Fellow of the [Sanders Institute](#), and most recently, he was the Healthcare Constituency Director for Bernie 2020.

Formerly he was director of public policy for the California Nurses Association/ National Nurses United. He was lead policy analyst, a leader of Campaign for a Healthy California and testified on behalf of the single-payer bill, SB 562.

## Get Involved / Take Action

[Subscribe to Code WACK!](#) *to catch all our weekly podcast episodes.*

[Subscribe to HEAL California](#) *for health policy news with a California focus*

[Join Healthy California Now](#) *- a coalition working toward a California single-payer system. Individual and organizational memberships available.*

[Join the CalCare Campaign](#) *to win single-payer in California, sponsored by National Nurses United/California Nurses Association.*