



**Does silence
still equal death?
For too many
Americans,
the answer is yes.**

*Featuring Michael Lighty,
Healthy California Now*

This time on Code WACK!

In honor of **PRIDE Month**, we're revisiting a popular podcast episode about the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. ***What were the health policy failures that spurred so many Americans to militant activism? How did the LGBTQ+ community win the struggle to get government funding to address the deadly virus?***

Fortunately today, with appropriate medical intervention, more and more people are living with, instead of dying from, HIV/AIDS. But the U.S. still trails many developed countries in life expectancy, a result of health policy failures that continue to cause unnecessary death and suffering.

What can today's 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

[Exclusive: More Than 70% of Americans Feel Failed by the Health Care System](#), *Time*

[The AIDS activists of the past have more to teach us](#), *CNN*

[How To Demand A Medical Breakthrough: Lessons From The AIDS Fight](#), *NPR*

[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.

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

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