AIDS & Medicine

Treatments

AIDS Treatments Timeline

1987

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approves the first medication for AIDS, AZT (zidovudine), an antiretroviral drug initially developed to treat cancer.

FDA issues regulations expanding access to promising new medications that have not yet been approved or licensed by the agency, accelerating drug approval by 2-3 years. This led to the development of a class of drugs called nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs).

1995

FDA approves saquinavir, the first in a different antiretroviral drug class called protease inhibitors. Like NRTIs, protease inhibitors stop the virus from copying itself, but at a different stage during the infection.

1996

FDA approves the first non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor (NNRTI), nevirapine (Viramune). Similar to AZT, NNRTIs shut down HIV by targeting the enzymes it needs to multiply.

Doctors began prescribing saquinavir plus AZT or other antiretrovirals. This combination therapy was dubbed highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART). HAART greatly lengthened the life span of people with AIDS.

1997

FDA approves a pill called Combivir that contained two anti-HIV drugs and was easier to take than HAART, which had required taking many pills every day.

A dozen antiretroviral drugs are available on the market, nearly 2 decades after the emergence of HIV and AIDS.

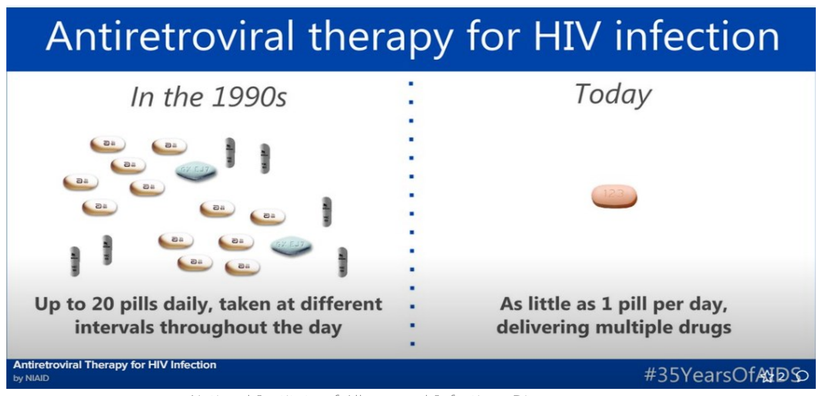
2007

FDA approves Raltegravir, the first in a novel class of antiretroviral drugs known as integrase inhibitors. This type of drug offers a different way to shortcut HIV from making copies of itself.



Protestors in front of the James A. Shannon Building, National Institutes of Health, 1990

The first drug therapy for AIDS, AZT (zidovudine), became available on March 20, 1987, following fast-track approval from the FDA. While AIDS patients and activists had long rallied for an effective treatment, AZT was not without controversy. In addition to its side effects, such as liver problems and sometimes-fatal low blood cell counts, AZT was also, at the time, the most expensive prescription drug in history, leading many to call for a boycott of the drug's manufacturer, Burroughs Wellcome.



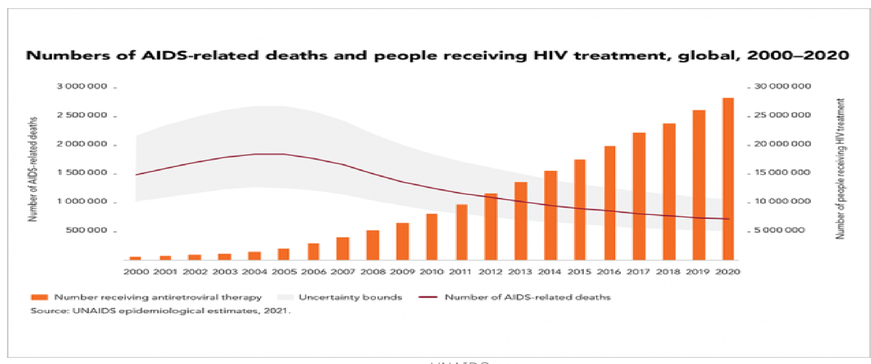
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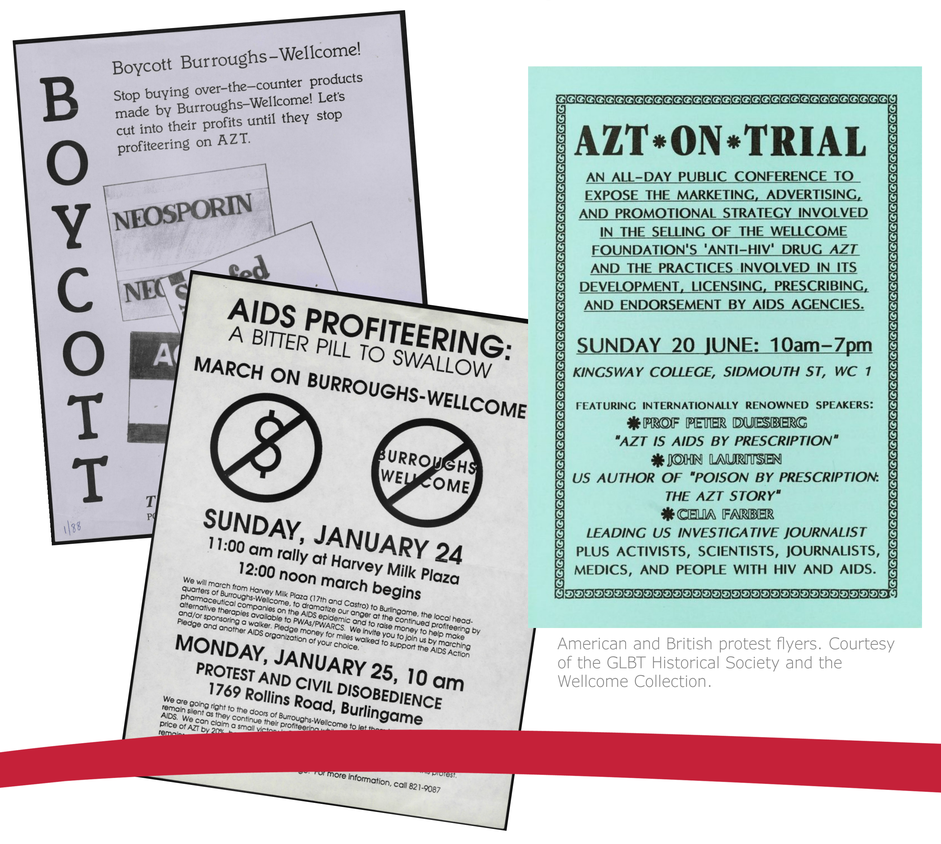
HIVinfo.NIH.gov

"I started working with AIDS patients in London in the early 1990s, and back then, we had no effective treatments – all we could offer was palliative care. But a few years later, the same ward was practically empty: while we still occasionally get patients where HIV has been diagnosed at quite a late stage, when the patients are already very, very sick, HIV/AIDS treatment has been completely transformed."

Dr. Lucy Dorrell, AIDS physician and researcher, Oxford News Blog, www.ox.ac.uk



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American and British protest flyers. Courtesy of the GLBT Historical Society and the Wellcome Collection.