

HIV Center Mourns the Passing of Alan Berkman, M.D.



After an extraordinary life and career dedicated to social justice and public health, ranging from clinical care to behavioral research to pioneering activism, our friend and colleague Alan Berkman, M.D. passed away on Friday, June 5, 2009. His death came after many years of health challenges, including repeated struggles with cancer, which only reinforced his exceptional empathy for and dedication to those facing HIV/AIDS and other serious health problems.

“Alan played a unique role at the HIV Center, acting as a bridge between clinical care and behavioral research, always underscoring the linkages between HIV care and prevention,” noted Anke A. Ehrhardt, Ph.D., Director of the HIV Center. “In addition to his superb skills as a physician, scholar, and a biomedical researcher, he was a human rights activist of the highest order and had a passion and moral courage that inspired us all.”

A 1971 graduate of the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, Dr. Berkman was a dedicated combatant in the social justice struggles of the 1960s and 70s. During the 1980s, he spent several years in federal prison resulting from his conflicts with US government policy. At mid-career, he studied at the HIV Center as a postdoctoral fellow from 1995-1997, honing the skills that would he would use over the following decade in both clinical and research settings, including as Medical Director of the Highbridge-Woodcrest Center in the Bronx and later as a professor in the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.

In 1999, Dr. Berkman founded the activist group Health GAP (Global Access Project). At a time when antiretroviral medications were becoming available in wealthy countries with the ability to pay the artificially inflated prices charged by pharmaceutical companies, Health GAP was – and continues to be – a leading force for equitable and universal access to HIV treatments.

At the time of his death, Alan was a member of the Leadership Group of the International Center for AIDS Care and Treatment Programs (ICAP), and acted as a critical link between ICAP and the HIV Center. He also served as Co-Director of the Columbia University/Southern Africa Fogarty AIDS International Training and Research Program. At the HIV Center, he was a Co-Director of the Statistics, Epidemiology, and Data Core and a Co-Investigator of the Global Community Core, as well as a key research team member on studies in the Dominican Republic.

A funeral for family, friends, and colleagues will be held on Tuesday, June 9th, at 10 am EST at the Plaza Jewish Community Chapel, 630 Amsterdam Avenue at 91st Street. For those who cannot attend, the funeral will be webcast at www.plazajewishcommunitychapel.org. At a future time, there will be a public memorial service to celebrate Alan's remarkable life. In lieu of flowers, Alan had requested that donations by check be made payable to Health GAP, subject line "Alan Berkman Fund," and sent to Health GAP, 429 W 127th St. 2nd floor, New York NY 10027.