

On the Use of Drones in Treating HIV Patients in Remote Communities

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Editorial

Like several of my peers, I noticed many similarities between the COVID-19 pandemic and the HIV epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. Fear, uncertainty, and persecution became rampant as friends turned into enemies and property was destroyed, and neighborhoods were cordoned. Governments waged war against unfamiliar threats, while people flooded the streets in protest of social inequities. In the United States, the healthcare system wrestled with this dilemma as it tried to rectify centuries of racism in the face of a public health emergency.

In South Carolina, HIV has disproportionately affected and continues to affect the African American community, a demographic which continues to experience uncontrolled incidence of injection drug use. It is well known that injection drug use, and more specifically needle sharing, increases the risk of transmitting HIV. In addition, as COVID-19 lockdowns were enacted in many states, physicians turned to telemedicine. Patients from low-income households, many of whom belong to the African American community or other racial minorities, likely suffered most as many lacked smartphones or laptops, or even Internet access. This effectively denied them of access to even basic healthcare services. What can the US healthcare system do to help HIV patients maintain timely access to care and medications?

Human immunodeficiency virus first emerged in Africa, where it continues to claim victims. While antiretroviral medications have helped tame the disease in many places, many remote and rural communities are struggling to recover. Some African nations have implemented drones to deliver HIV testing kits to remote communities. This low-cost technology could bridge the barrier to timely interventions for many remote parts of the United States, including Appalachia, Native American reservations, and parts of the Deep South. Many of these are the same areas in which isolated communities of racial minorities live with poor or no access to paved roads, much less air travel. Because of their small sizes, drones are easy to store in bulk and could be stationed at pharmacies and emergency rooms, ready to be deployed when needed.

In conclusion, I believe that drones are a feasible solution for serving America's underserved and neglected communities. In an era when the importance of racial equity and social justice are finally being recognized, drones could be a lifesaving option for many individuals and families who have few choices to begin with. While I do not claim to have the technical expertise in drone technology, I strongly feel that this is an avenue with lots of untapped potential.

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