

**1 in 8**  
people with  
**HIV**  
don't know  
**THEY**  
have it.



**Get the facts. Get tested. Get involved.**

# Michael Gottlieb: Alumnus First Identified AIDS

When the world was slow to grasp the epidemic's magnitude, he also became a leading AIDS activist.

BY ROB FORMAN

In the fall of 1980, a 33-year-old immunologist named Michael Gottlieb began hearing about young homosexual men in the Los Angeles area who, inexplicably, were becoming extremely ill. The men had a rare form of pneumonia—caused by the fungus *Pneumocystis carinii* (now

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called *P. jirovecii*)—which only strikes patients with severely weakened immune systems. The five men whose cases Gottlieb tracked did not know each other, and all but one had been in robust health until their physical conditions suddenly declined.

Gottlieb, who graduated from Rutgers in New Brunswick in 1969 with a degree in biological sciences, was then teaching at UCLA. He led a team that wrote up the troubling findings and submitted them to the Centers for Disease Control, which—on June 5, 1981—published them in *Morbidity and*

*Mortality Weekly Report*, a newsletter for health professionals.

To read its dense language now, laden with technical terms such as dyspnea, leukopenia, and esophageal candidiasis, and devoid of a single adjective that would suggest alarm, one might not readily appreciate how historic Gottlieb's work was. The article with the innocuous-looking title “Pneumocystis Pneumonia – Los Angeles” was the world's first documentation of AIDS.

Six months later, Gottlieb followed up with an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* suggesting that a virus might be at the root of the mysterious disease. It would take two years, but virologists who identified what we now know as HIV proved him right.

“With my first report, the AIDS epidemic was off and running,” Gottlieb recalls, and his role in its discovery would change his life. “My career took a 90-degree turn. On track for a research career in immunology, I became involved in advocacy and working with communities affected by AIDS.”

Just as he had educated the medical community with his early findings, Gottlieb would become a central figure in the event that, more

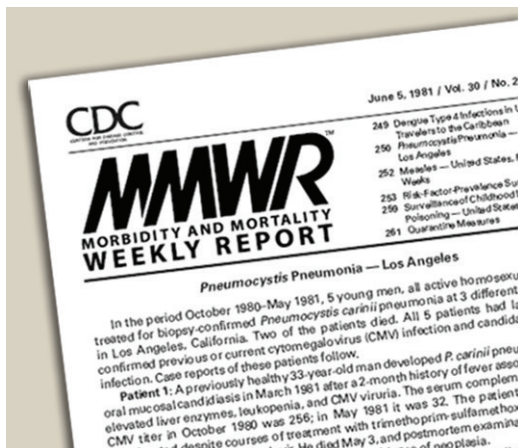
**U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention poster promoting HIV testing.**



**Michael Gottlieb identified the first AIDS cases, and also has been a vocal activist for patients.**

than any other, awakened the public to the impact of AIDS. In the mid-1980s, nobody in Hollywood had a more virile heterosexual image than the actor Rock Hudson. In 1985, a physically ravaged Hudson stepped before cameras to announce that he had AIDS and was dying. Michael Gottlieb was Hudson's physician. With the attention of the world suddenly focused on him, Gottlieb says, "it was hard to stay put in the ivory tower."

**Gottlieb first reported on a cluster of patients with unusual symptoms in the June 5, 1981, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* of the Centers for Disease Control.**



Gottlieb collaborated with Hudson's close friend Elizabeth Taylor and other prominent figures to found amFAR, the American Foundation for AIDS Research, and became its co-chair. Gottlieb was one of many who felt the Reagan Administration was slow to put the weight of the federal government behind efforts to curb the epidemic, and that patients dying from the disease had been abandoned, so he became a vocal advocate in the political arena. Over time, the government and other important players would begin to listen and act.

During the past three decades, thanks to the efforts of Gottlieb and countless others, HIV/AIDS has gone from being an automatic death sentence to a largely chronic disease. People with access to the right medications commonly live long lives.

Gottlieb has not stopped. He still treats patients at his Los Angeles medical practice, teaches at UCLA's David Geffen School of Medicine, and works with AIDS advocacy groups—with a frequent focus on Africa, where millions who do not receive proper care are still dying.

He credits his Rutgers experience for much of the revolutionary work he has done. "I took more humanities courses than science, which helped me avoid being a one-dimensional doctor," he says. "Once AIDS hit, I could not possibly stay out of the social and political dimensions of the epidemic. Rutgers has a whole lot to do with who I am."