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# John J. Potterat

A student of medieval history and coinage is one of the country's leading epidemiologists.

**T**HE '60S SEXUAL revolution and current AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa were milestone events for John Potterat, a Vietnam veteran-era hippie and retired director of Sexually Transmitted Diseases/AIDS programs for the El Paso County Department of Health in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Then, as now, Potterat is a person who likes to test boundaries.

Within a month of graduating from UCLA in 1965 with a degree in medieval history, Potterat was drafted and in 1966 sent to Vietnam, where, he says, "something changed in me." Hippies and the summer of '67 accelerated the transformation. "America was really changing then. Here was an opportunity to expand your thinking at a time when society condoned it, which appealed to me. I came back from Vietnam disoriented.

"I was attending graduate school at UCLA in early 1968, intending to get a degree in East Asian history because I really liked the culture, but I just couldn't find my focus. A counselor suggested I drop out for a while and recommended an available job.

There was a syphilis epidemic in Los Angeles at the time, and people were needed to help clean it up. I loved the work and discovered my true calling—I was a closet anthropologist."

His job took him to Watts, to the gay communities of west Los Angeles and, in 1972, to head the county's STD/HIV programs in Colorado Springs. When AIDS primarily struck gay men in the early '80s, Potterat considered it "a privilege to be accepted on the fringe of their lives and hear their most intimate secrets. They were appropriately terrified, since sex rarely was something that could put you at risk for death. They would see someone in a gay bar who was young, handsome and in apparent good health. A few weeks later, he looked like he'd been in Buchenwald."

A self-described "maverick and major irritant,"

Potterat was known to hit the streets, where he handed out condoms. He's always been driven by the inequity of people affected by sexually transmitted diseases and society's treatment of them. Most of the 125-plus scholarly papers he's written on the subject explore why certain populations become infected.

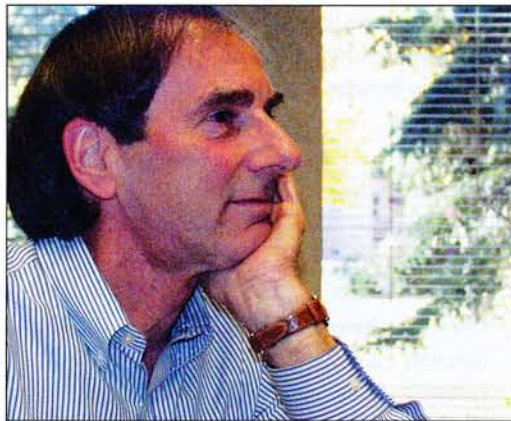
A February 2003 study on AIDS in Africa, conducted with David Gisselquist of Pennsylvania, has "set the world on fire," notes Potterat. It provides credible, albeit controversial, evidence that the epidemic affecting nearly 30 million Africans is largely caused by the reuse of contaminated medical needles, not by heterosexual sex as commonly believed. "If we're correct," he adds, "it won't be very difficult to make the epidemic implode."

His 30-year career as a public health official was guided by serendipity, notes Potterat. "I think all important things in life are lucky accidents. Even though I've been married nearly 35 years, I've had a life-long affair with another woman—Lady Luck. Things have sort of fallen into my life; I have no explanation for it, but I'm grateful."

Potterat says he's lucky to have the coins collected by a 12-year-old boy who died in 1924 of kidney failure. The youngster was the son of his wife's grandmother, who asked Potterat to preserve the collection. "In the process of being a good custodian, I began to learn about the coins. What has become a passion for me is the realization that they are affordable works of art. Ancient Greece and Rome, the Renaissance, pre-Islamic India and Europe from about 1600 to 1800—these are periods that have breathtakingly beautiful coins," he says.

In 1993 Potterat received the Nathan Davis Award, the American Medical Association's highest honor for contributions to public health. A lucky accident? Maybe . . . maybe not.

—Pamela Casteel



An inherited coin collection led to John Potterat's appreciation of numismatics.