

CENTRE FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE SEMINAR SERIES 2011-2012 SPRING TERM

Tuesday, 13 March 2012 (Week 10)
5.00 pm – Ramphal Building Room R.014

Dr Richard McKay
(History Department, Kings College London)

***"Patient Zero":
The Legacies of an Influential HIV/AIDS Origin Story***

Throughout history, societies visited by disease epidemics have attempted to understand their causes - efforts which have often led to accusations and blame. The initial recognition of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s was no different. One of the more notorious tales advanced to explain the origins of the North American epidemic was the story of 'Patient Zero'. This popular notion held that the disease was spread from coast to coast by a French-Canadian flight attendant named Gaétan Dugas, who was as intent on spreading his infection as he was on ignoring the warnings of public-health officials.

This presentation will chart the emergence and dissemination of the 'Patient Zero' concept, challenge some of its popular connotations, and explore the long-reaching consequences of this powerful story. It draws upon a combination of archival documents from across North America, and oral history interviews with Dugas's acquaintances, fellow flight attendants, and physicians, to articulate a more nuanced account of Dugas's experience with AIDS.



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