AIDS versus The Plague: 
Sociological and Scientific Similarities 

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Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, better known to many as AIDS, is a disease caused by a virus. With nearly no characterized symptoms, many do not know they are infected with the virus for years. The Bubonic Plague, mainly a disease of the past, is caused by the bacterium Yersinia pestis. Fever and large buboes on the body are characteristic of Plague. Even with different causative agents and symptoms, these two diseases are closely related.

In the time of the Plague, very little was known about medicine. This lack of knowledge led to many inexplicable deaths, with frantic survivors. When survivors tried to explain the disease, they only blamed a culture; innocent Jews were persecuted, tortured, and killed for deaths beyond their control. Unknown to the victims at that time, Yersinia pestis was to blame.

In a society that prides itself on its medical advancements, the initial recognition of AIDS was not impressive. When AIDS first surfaced in the United States, it was seen as a “gay disease”, a useless disease to research. Because of this initial stereotype, AIDS has become a pandemic, taking the lives of many heterosexual and homosexual individuals. The initial stereotype of the disease also gave society reason to reject homosexuals. Negativity towards a specific group of individuals is often the response to large outbreaks, though there are other sociological similarities of The Black Plague and AIDS.

Beyond the irrational blame and guilt intertwined in societal problems, there is a science to explain disease. Through research, scientists have found a genetic link between the resistance to AIDS and the resistance to the Black Plague. On the CCR5 gene, there may lay a mutation, known as CCR5-Delta 32. Possessing at least one copy of the mutated gene leads to resistance to AIDS and resistance to infection by Yersinia pestis. The gene is still being studied, but it provides one more link to a disease of the past with a pandemic of the present.