



Merle Alden Sande

Infectious disease expert who dealt with the first San Francisco AIDS epidemic and founded the Academic Alliance for AIDS Care and Prevention in Africa. Born in Mount Vernon, VA, USA, on Sept 2, 1939, he died of multiple myeloma on Nov 14, 2007, in Seattle, WA, USA, aged 68 years.

Merle Sande's initial interest in HIV/AIDS was more a product of circumstance than design. When, in the early 1980s, men started presenting to San Francisco General Hospital, where Sande was the new Chief of Medical Services, with strange conditions that seemed to be linked to an underlying immunodeficiency, his interest in infectious complications drove him to investigate further. As the epidemic exploded, Sande moved quickly to establish a separate ward for AIDS patients and put in place protocols for care and treatment—including the decision not to keep patients in an isolation ward—that would later see him hailed as one of the pioneers of a system of guidelines that is still used all over the USA.

Paul Volberding, Professor and Vice Chair of the Department of Medicine at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), who was recruited by Sande to the hospital's fledgling AIDS clinic in 1981, says Sande's risk-taking attitude—by allowing staff to bypass bureaucratic channels when funding was desperately needed—was what ensured that the team could keep on top of the epidemic. "We wouldn't have done it if we had gone through the proper channels", says Volberding.

Sande was known for putting compassion for patients above all else. But, crucially, he was also aware of the toll the HIV epidemic was taking on his staff. Volberding describes how Sande once flew his staff and their families to a summer retreat at Sun Valley, in Idaho, under the guise of a continuing education course and review of HIV management. But this was no simple excursion, recalls Volberding. "At a time when the university had very strict rules about upgrading on flights, Merle decided that we should charter a DC9 jet and fly all the families directly to the meeting—this was an example of Merle being a bit larger than the rule book would allow."

Having graduated in medicine from the University of Washington, in 1965, Sande taught medicine at the universities of Virginia and Texas. At Virginia, he became Professor of Medicine and Acting Chair of the Department of Medicine, before being tempted to San Francisco as Chief of Medical Services in 1980. He used this position to spearhead the creation of a world-class AIDS research centre, The Gladstone Institute of Virology and Immunology, in 1993, which Warner Greene now co-directs with Volberding. Greene describes Sande as "an energetic visionary", who "was a person not satisfied with the status quo and always looking for exciting new programmes".

Sande moved to the University of Utah, in 1996, but after 6 years as Chair of the Department of Medicine, he left to work on the Academic Alliance Foundation, which he set up in 2001 to build capacity to fight the HIV/AIDS crisis in Uganda in association with Makerere University. According to Volberding, he regarded this work as his most important career achievement. Securing major funding from Pfizer for establishing an Infectious Disease Institute in Kampala, Uganda, Sande set about promoting his academic approach to physician training. Sande wanted the institute in Uganda not just to provide care, or do research, but to combine clinical care with an ambitious training programme for African providers. And by doing so, to begin to build the academic infrastructure. "It is a very powerful approach and one that we hope will be replicated in many other places", Volberding says.

Charismatic and forward thinking, colleagues recall Sande's enthusiasm and the way he encouraged them to grow in their roles. But for Greene, it was Sande's approach to life after being diagnosed with cancer that reveals his uniqueness. "From the time [he was diagnosed] he was about getting everything in order and making sure that the infectious disease institute in Kampala was set to carry on without him", says Greene. "He was absolutely focused and driven. And all of us admired him so much for redoubling his efforts when others would have retreated." Sande is survived by his wife, Jenny Lo, four children, and eight grandchildren.

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