

Making AIDS History

Momentous breakthroughs in science and policy scale new heights as The International AIDS Conference returns to Washington

BY SUSAN J. BLUMENTHAL, M.D., M.P.A.

Consider this: In Washington, D.C., nearly 1 out of 30 people are living with HIV/AIDS—a rate that is higher than 15 African countries, including Rwanda and Angola.

This summer marks the return of the International AIDS Conference to the United States for the first time in more than two decades. From July 22–27, The International AIDS Society will convene more than 25,000 delegates from nearly 200 countries in America’s capital. The meeting is being held this year in Washington, D.C., as a result of President Obama’s lifting, in October 2009, of the 22-year-old U.S. government travel and immigration ban that prohibited people with HIV/AIDS from entering the U.S. This important change in public policy reflects the Obama Administration’s leadership on eradicating AIDS, its adoption of evidence-based policies, and its rejection of the stigma that has surrounded the disease.

Today, 34 million people are living with HIV/AIDS globally, 2.7 million were infected with the virus last year, and nearly 30 million people have died from the disease since the beginning of the epidemic. Worldwide, 50% of people living with HIV are women. In the U.S., there are 1.2 million people living with HIV, with more than 50,000 new HIV infections and 18,000 deaths from AIDS-related causes annually. Of all new HIV infections in America in 2009, 61% were men who have sex with men, 23% were women and 68% were people of color.

The International AIDS Conference will highlight strategies for achieving an AIDS-free generation. For the first time in the history of the epidemic, dramatic advances in science provide the possibility of achieving a world



LEFT: Dr. Susan Blumenthal, Cokie Roberts, Whoopi Goldberg and Kenneth Cole at the 2011 amfAR Capitol Hill Conference on Making AIDS History: Ending the Epidemic. BELOW: amfAR co-founder Dame Elizabeth Taylor testifying before Congress in 1990 with Rep. Nancy Pelosi.

where no child will be born with HIV and where the risk of infection will be dramatically reduced with a combination of powerful prevention tools. There is real hope that a vaccine and, ultimately, a cure will emerge in our lifetimes.

As a public health doctor who has worked on eradicating AIDS since the beginning of the epidemic, I have seen firsthand how investments in research have produced lifesaving antiretroviral medications (ARVs) that have revolutionized HIV/AIDS treatment. Today, nearly 7 million people are receiving these drugs globally, transforming what was once a lethal disease into a chronic, manageable condition for many. However, of the more than 14 million people with HIV/AIDS worldwide who need medications, less than half receive ARVs. Now we must intensify efforts to ensure that all people with the disease in need receive treatment.

Scientists are making significant progress on many prevention fronts. Research is underway to develop a vaccine that would protect people from acquiring HIV. Recent landmark studies have revealed that a “prevention pill,” combining two HIV treatment drugs— can also prevent

HIV transmission by as much as 92%. In May 2012, an FDA advisory committee recommended approval of this medication for preventing AIDS in populations at high risk of acquiring the virus through sexual activity. Other research has found that early treatment of an HIV-infected partner decreases transmission to an uninfected partner by 96%, underscoring that treatment is also prevention. These advances can now be combined with other proven prevention measures to help save countless lives.

This remarkable progress towards ending AIDS, however, is threatened by a decline in resources and the threat of budget cuts to support HIV research and services worldwide, as well as a lack of initiatives that target vulnerable populations. While U.S. global health investments today represent less than 1% of America’s budget, these funds support lifesaving research and services for millions of people in developing nations and help build a world with more friends and fewer enemies, a critical tool of “smart” power in our nation’s foreign policy.

To ensure that the U.S. and the world are on track to realize an AIDS-free generation—a goal President Obama announced on World AIDS Day 2011 – there are many organizations you can support, including the one with which I’ve been closely aligned for many years: amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research, www.amfAR.org

As the International AIDS Conference convenes here in July, let us, together, help make AIDS history. **WL**

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