

**Interview: 15th Annual AIDS Conference: Bangkok Notebook:
Science Reporter Jon Cohen
July 12, 2004**

¹ kaisernetwork.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

[START RECORDING]

JACKIE JUDD: Jon Cohen of Science magazine, thanks for joining us for what will be a weeklong series of interviews. This is our first so let's start at the beginning. This is your 10th International AIDS conference. You attended the opening ceremonies. You've said they were shocking. In what way?

JON COHEN: Well, I've seen 9 other opening ceremonies and typically the crowd of people that comes into the hall largely is there at the end. This is 11,000 people into this hall and they're all around the same size. And it's a quite big spectacle, but there were a few hundred people left in the room by the time the last speaker spoke and they cut 2 of the speakers who were on the program. The world leaders who spoke, including Kofi Annan had left in midstream of the ceremony. They just walked out, including Richard Gere and Miss Universe who attracted so much attention as they entered the hall with the Klieg lights on them, and then it just evaporated and started to fall apart. My heart really went out for the speakers and for the people who had spent a few years organizing.

JACKIE JUDD: Right. Why did it happen and what significance do you take from it?

JON COHEN: I think part of the reason it happened to be fair is they started the session at 7 at night. People are hungry. They just want to go out and see their friends, but

¹ kaisernetwork.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

part of the reason it happened was because people followed the lead of the leaders who left. I saw the audience dwindle dramatically after the big leaders walked out. I don't know why the big leaders left and I think it's a worthy question to ask them. I thought it was disrespectful and I thought it was certainly disrespectful to the other speakers who had yet to speak. We're here to attend a conference and this was the opening of the meeting.

JACKIE JUDD: Beyond it being rude, significance?

JON COHEN: Well, I think it does have a symbolism. The challenge right now in the whole world of HIV and AIDS is to commit to action, long-term commitment. Getting treatment to people is a start, but continuing to get the treatment to people is the real challenge. It's not just getting drugs into people for a year, it's doing it for their lives. And so I saw this symbolic moment of the leaders didn't even have the commitment to stay through the ceremony and people did follow the leaders. So I was just astonished. I looked at this and I was talking to the people next to me and they started to leave. And I said, well, I'm going to stick it out. I couldn't leave. I became mesmerized by watching it fall apart.

JACKIE JUDD: The other thing that's not happening here as well is the Prime Minister of Thailand had invited about half a dozen heads of state. All but one refused, did not come. The one being the President of Uganda, Museveni. Is the lack of

¹ kaisernetwork.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

the heads of state being here important or again, does that go back to symbolism?

JON COHEN: To be fair to the people, I don't know why they didn't go to their invited meeting. They could have very solid reasons for not attending, but the symbolism does matter. This conference isn't strictly a meeting for scientists to exchange information, this is the whole community of people who are concerned about HIV/AIDS and they make the inclusion of world leaders a centerpiece of the meeting. Because really stopping HIV requires leadership at the highest levels, that's the point that everyone keeps making about Thailand. They had a condom promotion program from the highest levels. They make it about Uganda and what President Museveni had done there because of his leadership. So when you don't see everybody working together as leaders, it does raise questions. I think it is a serious issue.

JACKIE JUDD: The other question that is raised, you can't be in this media center without hearing it time and again is the fact that the U.S. delegation is so much smaller this time than the last time. Again, does it matter in the sense of real science? Is there still going to be the exchange of ideas, the science being introduced to scientists from other parts of the world?

JON COHEN: Well, the U.S. delegation that didn't come is the delegation that works for the Department of Health and

¹ kaisernetwork.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

Human Services.

JACKIE JUDD: They came, but in smaller numbers.

JON COHEN: In smaller numbers, but it doesn't say anything about the academics in the U.S. who certainly don't follow the lead of the Department of Health and Human Services or the Bush Administration. But again, it's a symbolic problem. The NIH funds more AIDS research than any single entity on earth and for the NIH to not seriously send its top people here to present their top finding, certainly sends a message to the world. And indeed, the message from the Secretary of Health and Human Services was explicit, that it's not that important of a meeting. To say that the U.S. can't afford to send the people is what has led many people to scratch their heads, given that this is an international meeting. People are highly critical of the U.S. internationally right now.

JACKIE JUDD: The analogy you were making before we started this interview was it's like holding a company retreat and some key employees not showing up. So that in terms of actual content you think there may be some gaps?

JON COHEN: Yeah, there certainly are gaps and I know from speaking to NIH scientists who are here who know the specific things that aren't here, that there were some good presentations that didn't make it here. In the scheme of things that to me isn't as important as the other point, which is for those of us who have been coming to these meetings for years

¹ kaisernetwork.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

and years and years it is kind of a big family. It is kind of a retreat for all of the people who are concerned, and to not have some key participants come to that retreat leaves a sense of, oh, we're not all in this together? And this meeting tries to foster this Kumbaya thing where we're all kind of rocking and at the end of the day the world is a fractured place. There are rich countries. There are poor countries. There are fractures in all sorts of directions that you see between Asia, Africa, the U.S. I mean you see these things here. This is everything here and so when you see a leading player, a rich player, say, we don't think it's worth it. It sends waves through the whole community.

JACKIE JUDD: And I should add thought that Ambassador Randall Tobias, the President's AIDS Czar, was asked some of these same questions yesterday and he said that the U.S. delegation was large enough that there was no science missing. That it was sufficient. But let's move on for a moment. For somebody who's never been to a conference, for some of the folks watching this on the web, describe what the atmospherics are like.

JON COHEN: It's like you're on another planet. I mean the ingredients here are bizarre. It's kind of everything and anything. It's part serious, hard-core science. It's part theater, circus. It's part party time. It's community people who have no voice, typically, in their own homes having a voice

¹ kaisernetwork.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

here to get on a stage, whether you're speaking about somebody who is a transsexual or an injecting drug user. The opening ceremony last night when everyone walked out, they didn't hear an injecting drug user in Thailand who gave a speech criticizing his government. Where else do you see that on a stage like that? It just doesn't happen. So it's a very special planet and when I come into orbit here and I get on this planet, I'm just wide eyed the entire week because everywhere you turn there's something you've never seen before. And there's no end to it. You can't possibly take it all in. It's absolutely overwhelming.

JACKIE JUDD: Okay. Well we will revisit the planet tomorrow in our next interview with Jon Cohen of Science magazine. Thank you.

[END RECORDING]