

Kaisernetwork.org Daily Update from the XV International AIDS Conference July 14, 2004

As U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator Ambassador Randall Tobias prepared to address the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, protests overtook applause. After several minutes, activists quieted down, and Tobias defended U.S. HIV/AIDS policy. "It is time – in fact, it is past time – to move forward from this point," he said. "Too much time has been lost already."

Daily protests against the U.S. and other G8 countries have peppered the conference. Grievances include drug pricing and funding policies as well as a perceived single-minded reliance on abstinence as the main weapon against AIDS.

"I want to get something straight about the U.S. position on prevention, because there seems to be a lot of confusion and misinformation," said Tobias. "Preventing AIDS is not a multiple-choice test. There is no one right way to preventing the spread of this pandemic. Those who want to simplify the solution to just one method – any one method – do not understand the complexity of the problem."

In an interview with kaisernetwork.org, Tobias, on the eve of his departure from Bangkok, seemed uncertain about the real need for a conference like this. "You really need to say, 'Was the value that was generated by this kind of a conference worth that kind of money, or could part of that money be spent more efficiently in some other directions in order to fight HIV/AIDS?'"

Also today, delegates focused on women and youth, who in some areas of the world represent the majority of new HIV cases. Professor Dennis Altman of La Trobe University in Australia, who delivered the Jonathan Mann Memorial Lecture, in memory of the man credited with building the World Health Organization's AIDS program, said information is a powerful tool.

"Both conservatives and liberals place great emphasis on choice. Advice just to say no, which we hear from the U.S., is equivalent in some ways to advice to always follow safer sex and injecting practices. But before we have choice, we need both knowledge and resources to act on that knowledge. Yet estimates from most parts of the poor world suggest a continuing ignorance about HIV and the basic measures to control it."

It's a theme heard often at this conference -- a one-size-fits-all approach will never work. It will take a broad coalition from religious leaders to governments to stop the spread of HIV.