

**Toronto Notebook  
XVI International AIDS Conference  
August 13, 2006**

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**JACKIE JUDD:** Jon Cohen, thank you so much for joining us once again at these conferences.

**JON COHEN:** I'm really happy to be doing this again.

**JACKIE JUDD:** How many of these have you covered?

**JON COHEN:** I started covering these in 1990, so this is number 11.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Okay, and each one tries to have an individual signature through its theme. The theme this year is Time to Deliver. What does that mean and how many other themes have you heard through the years?

**JON COHEN:** I went through this actually because I was hearing an echo in my head from Time to Deliver, so I went through the last few years. Last year was Access for All, which I think is really the same as Time to Deliver. The year before that was Knowledge and Commitment for Action, which I think is really the same. The year before was Break the Silence, which was really kind of the same. The year before was Bridging the Gap, which is really kind of the same. I went

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all the way back to 1991, which was in Florence, Italy, and it was Science Challenging AIDS. I think that says a great deal about how things have changed.

**JACKIE JUDD:** And how it is more appropriate to this stage of the epidemic.

**JON COHEN:** Yes, and since the Bridging the Gap issue, which was in Geneva in 1998, the point of the conference has been how do we deliver to poor and middle-income countries, what the wealthy countries already have - which reflects the fact that in a 1996 conference, it became clear that there were effective treatments. They don't cure the disease, but they let live people live a much longer life.

**JACKIE JUDD:** When I have asked some conference leaders about the theme and what it means - because it could be read really in so many different ways - one word that keeps coming up is accountability.

**JON COHEN:** Yes.

**JACKIE JUDD:** That what is said here, what is promised here: There needs to be some accountability. Is that a new theme or is that, again, something you've heard before?

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**JON COHEN:** I have heard it before, but it is becoming a more important theme because so many new billions of dollars are being poured into the effort. When there is new money, follow the money. Where is it going? Is it turning into pills into people's mouths? Is it turning into real prevention activities on the street? What is happening? I think it is the job of the media, in particular, to scrutinize it.

**JACKIE JUDD:** How has the personality of the conferences changed over the years, as well?

**JON COHEN:** In the early years, when I was covering this, there was a great deal of anger from the activist community because nothing was working. And there was a great deal of frustration and despair. And there were demonstrations in the streets, and the demonstrations within the conference hall were largely staged by people who were dying, or led at least by people who were dying and heard the clock ticking. That has changed. The activism now is much more fragmented. People have many different agendas, and activism still is a big component.

**JACKIE JUDD:** In terms of the conference participants, I presume it was more narrowly tailored to scientists, but now

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you have movie stars, singers, high-profile activists. How new is all of that? And how much more pronounced is that in Toronto?

**JON COHEN:** In science, the low-hanging fruit is picked first. In the early years, there was a lot of low-hanging fruit around because there were so many fundamental questions that had not been answered. Well, many of them have been answered now, so in the earlier years the meeting had a lot of science that made people's eyes pop. Now, it's much harder. The fruit is higher up on the tree, so it is simply harder to find things that really tell new stories about the science. I think that stuff still exists. It is harder, it's harder -

**JACKIE JUDD:** We'll get to that in a moment, but filling that vacuum in a way, is this kind of celebrity aura that is in Toronto?

**JON COHEN:** An explosion of celebrity, and I don't mean to be too reductionist about it, but I think that much of that celebrity rise is circling around Bill Gates. Bill Gates has a foundation that he contributed over \$30 billion dollars worth of his stock to, and now he has Warren Buffett's \$30 billion. I mean it has changed the philanthropic world completely, and

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HIV/AIDS is a central part of their agenda, of the Gates Foundation's agenda.

The celebrity – most everyone wants Gates' money, and the celebrities that are coming around the conference, I can draw lines to Gates again and again. The politicians, and I think it is important that Bill and Melinda Gates are the keynote speakers at this conference. That marks a point in time. He did give the keynote speak at the largest U.S. conference on AIDS a few years ago, but not with Melinda, and not with this much attention. I mean, 24,000 people are here, and I think it is all for the good. I think the impact of this attention that celebrities draw does trickle down and inform lots of people who otherwise couldn't care less about the subject.

**JACKIE JUDD:** It does get it back on the agenda, at least for a few days.

**JON COHEN:** At least for the five days, or whatever it is. So I think it's a positive thing, but I think it's also something we have to watch carefully.

**JACKIE JUDD:** In terms of the scientific part of the program, the prevention reports, the treatment reports, will there be anything to use your phrase, earlier, "eye popping"?

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**JON COHEN:** For people like me, for the aficionados, it is going to be hard to find stuff that really makes our eyes pop. I will find stuff, because there is so much here. There is always something to learn. Much of what will happen is, I think, the meeting will amplify what people at the front have reported in the last year, or the last six months at other meetings. This meeting will broadcast that to the world, so it won't be so eye popping and new to the people at the front, so for many scientists from middle-income countries or poor countries who do not have access to the information, I think it will have a big impact, and it will make their eyes pop out.

**JACKIE JUDD:** For the general media, and therefore, general audience, what kind of reporting or headlines do you expect to come out of here?

**JON COHEN:** I have thought a lot about that. I think what is going to come out of here is largely what those of us who cover this routinely have reported in the last year. Journalists typically have this - there is this phrase, "If not discovered here." When a journalist discovers something, if the paper has never run anything on that, then they have discovered it. It is news, because for their audience, it is new. I think they are going to be discovering many things have

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come out in the past year that have received attention, but not as much attention as they probably deserve.

**JACKIE JUDD:** In prevention, for example.

**JON COHEN:** In prevention, I think you are going to see a lot of attention given to circumcision. The results of the three big circumcision trials that were organized to see whether if you gathered a group of man, circumcised half and did not circumcise the other half, would this have an impact on transmission. One of the trials was stopped early last year, because they found that it had a major impact. About a 60-percent reduction of transmission. That received some media attention. I think at this meeting, it is going to become news again.

**JACKIE JUDD:** As part of a larger discussion of how prevention is now defined and viewed?

**JON COHEN:** Exactly. We have had this concept of using several AIDS drugs at once to attack the virus, cocktail treatments, triple combo therapy. I think it is now becoming clear that it is cocktail prevention, as well. Circumcision gets added into abstinence, behavioral change, condoms. Well, if these other trials are under way in Uganda and Kenya, proven

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to work, circumcision becomes part of that package of prevention. We won't learn at this meeting whether those trials have positive or negative data - they are still under way - but it does change the perception of what prevention is, and there are a handful of other things that are in the pipeline that are being studied right now that are equally provocative about how to prevent transmission.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Just briefly, on the treatment side, what are you expecting?

**JON COHEN:** Well, the main thing is going to be the cry for more access, and the demand for more access to existing treatments. To simplifying the regimens for people, so they do not have to take as many pills, and they get better drugs available in countries that have limited resources.

But in the future, there is a new class of drugs - right now the best way to get HIV is to hit it from as many directions as you can - right now the drugs that are on the market in the United States can hit the virus from three different angles. There is a new drug that is far along in development that hits from a fourth angle, a new angle. The data that we saw earlier this year from that drug, it looks really good, it is called integrase inhibitor. If that does

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hold up and prove to be safe and efficacious, I think that will have a major impact on treating the disease.

Many, many things, if not most things, in science fail, and many drugs that are in development, once you put them into 1,000 people, you see things that you didn't see in 100 people. That's the process. So it could be that these drugs end up in the trash can, but right now I think I think they look very promising.

**JACKIE JUDD:** We will talk more about that in particular through the week, and we will talk again tomorrow. Thank you, Jon Cohen.

**JON COHEN:** Thank you, Jackie.

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