

Newsmaker Interviews: Dr. Julio Frenk XVI International AIDS Conference August 17, 2006

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JACKIE JUDD: Dr. Frenk, thank you and welcome.

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: Thank you.

JACKIE JUDD: In the spirit that it is never too early to talk about the next AIDS conference, the next one, of course, will be held in Mexico City in 2008. What do you expect the significant issues to be there?

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: First of all, we are very honored that Mexico was chosen to be the host of the next International AIDS Conference. It is the first time it will be held in Latin America and I think that is an important recognition of many good things that have happened, and also the relating challenges.

I think a lot of the emerging topics were presented here in Toronto. They renewed emphasis on prevention, renewed tools for prevention. I think that the tools have the potential of empowering women, the need to focus in more on youth and the problems of young persons, both as a force for prevention and also because they are increasingly a population that lives with HIV. Those have been, I think, topics, and then the insistence on having a universal access to comprehensive care as we have now achieved in Mexico. So, I think we will continue to see some of these topics emerging.

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I would like one of, which we are very proud in Mexico which I hope will be emphasized there, is the fight against discrimination and stigma, which has been of course very present here and in previous AIDS conferences. But we would like to push that even further. That is something that Mexico has made even a constitutional amendment, to forbid discrimination.

Finally, I would also like to see more emphasis on the vulnerability of migrants. Migration is a huge topic of our times and this is a population that is particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

So some of the topics have emerged very prominently here. Others have been on the agenda for a long time, but we need to reemphasize them, and some are now beginning to acquire great significance.

JACKIE JUDD: I remember in 2004, when the AIDS conference was held in Bangkok and everyone said one of the great values of doing it in Bangkok was that it put the world spotlight on AIDS in Asia. And now the same thing will happen for Latin America in 2008. What I wonder is, what is the practical effect of putting the spotlight on AIDS in Latin America? What comes of it?

JULIO FRENK, MD, PH.D, MPH: I think many good things come, I mean, just raising the awareness. First of all, that this is a global problem. You know, Mexico has a relatively

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low prevalence rate, but whatever happens to an AIDS patient in an African nation, or the Caribbean, are neighbors. It is very relevant to Mexico, to Mexico as a society and not just for the groups where we have the epidemic concentrated but to all society.

AIDS is a problem of development and security as much as it is the largest public health challenge of our times and that no country and no community is immune or can remain indifferent to what is going on with AIDS in the world. Now, that kind of awareness-raising among the ghetto population and also among policy makers I think has an enormous [inaudible] because we have in Latin America and many countries to think that this is a problem of other parts of the world, sub-Saharan Africa, even the Caribbean which is so close to us. But yet we tend to think it is another, it is the problem of others or of other groups, men who have sex with men or commercial sex workers or intravenous drug users. And that is where the whole stigmatization process begins. So the first thing is to raise awareness that this is our problem also and this is of enormous value of holding the conference in Mexico.

JACKIE JUDD: *Science Magazine* recently ran extensive coverage of AIDS in Latin America. Jon Cohen wrote it, who we've have spent time this week and the title of the section

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was "The Forgotten Epidemic." It sounds like you agree exactly with that take.

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: [Interposing] I agree completely. I think the [inaudible] reporting was excellent and the service that has done to raise awareness is a big service. And we hope that bringing the conference to Latin America will continue that line.

JACKIE JUDD: You mentioned earlier that there is a constitutional amendment banning discrimination in Mexico. What prompted that action? How severe was - and still I presume - is the problem of stigma and discrimination in Mexico?

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: This is the third killer of our strategy. We have first pillar is prevention, second pillar is universal access, and we added this and why did this happen in Mexico first?

We had a transition into [inaudible] and you cannot have a democratic society where people are discriminated on the basis of their health condition or their preferences. So that is a big movement in society and in the Congress to reflect that. This is Article I of the constitution, so we changed it the provision so that it opens saying discrimination, there cannot be discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnic origin, we are a mostly ethnic society, has condition, preferences, all of this is [inaudible] in the

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constitution. Now this has very practical indications.

[Inaudible] from that, and a national council to prevent and fight discrimination has been established.

Now, that council is now working in collaboration with the National AIDS Council and we have made AIDS a focus of the fight against discrimination. And this has been translated both into, I think, very successful campaigns, particularly a campaign against homophobia that has received two international awards and also legal action. I mean, it is not just awareness-raising and conscious awareness or making people more conscious of the problem, it is also legal action. We now have a recourse to get to our subject discrimination. A kid gets expelled from a school because he is HIV-positive. Now, the parents, or the kid himself or herself can have somewhere to go - Or someone loses his or her job, that person has somewhere to go.

But we need to act on the two sides, the law and then cultural change, and that is where our largest challenge lies because we have deep rooted traditions of machismo and general discrimination against people who - or intolerance to diversity.

JACKIE JUDD: You mentioned the other pillar, one of the three other pillars being universal access. In the real world, is it truly universal access for the rich as well as for the poor?

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JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: Everybody who needs it gets it?

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: The innovation that Mexico introduced - and I think it is part of why the International AIDS Society selected Mexico - is that when the current administration when I started as minister in 2000, half the population was insured, had insurance. Like in the United States, it is employment-based insurance except it is social insurance. But only those who have a salary job had insurance.

The other half, which includes the poorest persons, the peasants who work on their own land, the small shopkeeper who has his or her own shop, those were uninsured and therefore if they happened to need AIDS treatment they couldn't afford it. So the most single [inaudible] thing I have done in six years as minister is introduce a new program called "Popular Health Insurance," *Segura popular* [misspelled?] in Spanish, which is the sign to cover the uninsured and it will do so over a seven-year period because we have to ensure 50 million people who were uninsured in the year 2000.

But because some things cannot wait seven years, the law allows for what we call accelerated universal coverage and the first condition that was chosen for that was treatment for AIDS.

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So since 2003, every uninsured person who requires treatment is automatically eligible for enrollment into the new insurance team and has all comprehensive care, including drugs. But it is not just for drugs, it is for laboratory tests, counseling. And then other diseases, I mean other problems, because patients with AIDS also have other problems.

So this is now a reality and we are reaching about 97-percent of those who will be eligible. We still need to make an effort that everyone is aware that they are now entitled. But it is in using AIDS as a driver of change to achieve universal insurance. I think this has been a big innovation that Mexico has brought to the table.

JACKIE JUDD: Given the culture climate that you mentioned earlier, how did you manage to make that happen?

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: Well, I think although there may be prejudice and discrimination, it is also true that when someone is ill, this mobilizes feelings of solidarity. And I think because we started educational campaigns way from the beginning of the epidemic in the early '80s, some of the initial victim-blaming is at least certainly no more out in the open. It may still be there some [inaudible] But the other thing is we argued that obviously, ethically every human life is vital, but that also achieving universal treatment made a lot of economic sense

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for the economy, for our competitiveness, for the economic growth of Mexico.

And this is why we persuaded the minister of finance in the Congress to increase the budget for AIDS by 14-fold, 14 times it's increased. This is how we achieved universal coverage.

So in addition to the ethical obligation to save any life, we also can mobilize an economic rationale that this makes good economic sense and that treating persons with AIDS is not an expenditure, it is an investment. And so people in the prime of their life, as a society, we've already put most of them through public schooling. They are now experienced, they have been trained, they are heads of families and many times providing for other people in the community. They are valuable members of our community, so it makes sense as an investment. And I think having used this rationale was very persuasive.

And the most important thing: We work with civil society. This was not done by the government alone. So we now have reformed our National AIDS Council so now civil society organizations have a seat there, they are not just observers, they vote. So they are now co-responsible for police [misspelled?] and that mobilize the energy of the NGO movement and they were tremendous ally to get this by the time freezes and to achieve universal coverage.

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JACKIE JUDD: I have a final question, bringing it back to this conference and moving into Mexico City. At the beginning of the week, I talked with many conference leaders who emphasized the concept of accountability, that what is said here, there will be some accountability at the next conference. How is that implemented in Mexico City, that concept?

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: Well, I will give you an example. On Sunday, I had the honor of being invited to a high-level panel on youth, youth and AIDS, which I was saying at the beginning is one of the emerging topics and I really congratulate Toronto for having put those topics on the agenda. So someone said, well, you know it is great, we doubled the number of young persons between Bangkok and Toronto, so I said, well -

JACKIE JUDD: In terms of attendance.

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: In terms of number of attendance for our young persons. So I made the commitment that I would double it again for Mexico. Well, the young persons, who are there to keep us honest, ask me to go and I am doing that, to their booth and write it down.

JACKIE JUDD: Okay.

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: So in two years, we will have to count whether we achieved that goal of doubling the attendance of young persons and be held to account and I

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think this is very good. For those of us who are in government, we need to be held accountable and I think that it is the energy of society that does that and this is the spirit we'll bring to Mexico certainly.

JACKIE JUDD: We will check with you in two years and good luck to you.

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: Thank you. It will be a hard act to follow. Toronto has done a great job, but we are starting already now and we feel very full of energy from the positive outcome of the Toronto conference.

JACKIE JUDD: See you in 2008.

JULIO FRENK, MD, PHD, MPH: Thank you very much.

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