

Daily Roundup from the XVI International AIDS Conference in Toronto, Canada Thursday, August 17, 2006

The XVI International AIDS Conference began today by addressing the need for a coordinated and comprehensive approach to HIV that includes elements some say are often overlooked.

“Protection of human rights is an HIV prevention strategy. It’s not an add on,” said Mark Heywood is with South Africa’s AIDS Law Project. “We’ve reached the point in the AIDS epidemic globally where we have many resources, many technologies that are available both for prevention and for treatment which give us the capability to save hundreds of thousands, potentially millions of lives both in terms of people already infected and in preventing new infections. And what that does is it puts an even greater onus on governments to provide the political leadership to make sure that health systems and governance gets those technologies and implements them in a way that is effective in curtailing and mitigating the AIDS epidemic.”

Kerrel McKay of Jamaica’s Portland AIDS Committee called for young people to play a critical leadership role in stopping HIV. “HIV/AIDS is affecting the world, but the fastest and hardest hit is our young,” said McKay. “Therefore, there is no need for convincing that the right mechanisms should be in place to combat this epidemic and fast.”

One mechanism is funding. An analysis of the potential effects of funding scale up for treatment in developing countries shows it's possible to dramatically curtail the long-term economic impact of HIV. That’s according to Jean Paul Moatti of the University of Marseilles.

“It is worth investing in domestic response and it is very important to do it as soon as possible,” said Moatti. “That is why we say, ‘time is costly.’ And adding to that to some extent, adding to that at the macro level at the level of global economic policy of a country this is very important.”

Initial scientific findings presented at the conference, by Leigh Peterson from Family Health International, showed potential promise for safely reducing the risk of HIV infection with a daily dose of the antiretroviral tenofovir. Dubbed pre-exposure prophylaxis -- the idea is to offer another protection option.

“What we know works are condoms,” said Peterson. “The problem is that not everyone is able to negotiate condom use at all times so we need additional tools in order to help these women and men protect themselves in these particular cases where they cannot negotiate condom use. If this is found to be effective and there is widespread use we will always say that this needs to be used with condoms. It won’t be a mono treatment.”

Researchers caution that while preliminary trials results showed the drug tenofovir safe, the number of HIV infections that occurred during the study was not enough to show statistical significance to conclude pre-exposure prophylaxis works.

Jill Braden Balderas with kaisernetwork.org