

Jackie Judd Interview with Peter Piot December 1, 2003

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JACKIE JUDD: Good day. I'm Jackie Judd with the Kaiser Network. December 1st is World AIDS Day. The first World AIDS Day was back in 1988. Then fewer than five million people were living with HIV/AIDS. Today, in 2003, about 40 million men, women, and children around the world are infected. A leading voice in the international effort to fight the epidemic is Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS. Thank you so much for joining us today. We appreciate it. The theme of this day - of this World AIDS Day is stigma and discrimination. Why did you pick that as the theme?

DR. PETER PIOT: One of the main lessons we've learned over the last 20 years dealing with this epidemic is that AIDS is associated with shame, stigma, and discrimination. And that's not only unfair, it's not only a violation of the rights of people who have it or are thought to be infected, but it's also one of the major obstacles to prevention, to speak about it, to leadership. Who wants to be associated with something that's so shameful? And it's also an obstacle to providing access to care, to treatment to those who have it because they don't want to be tested. They don't want to come forward for treatment because of the stigma and discrimination.

JACKIE JUDD: And it's - you're still stigmatized because of the way it's transmitted through sex, intravenous drug use, et cetera. Is that why?

DR. PETER PIOT: The reason that AIDS is so difficult

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to deal with is that it's associated with sex, with drugs, with behaviors that are immoral in the eyes of many people. And that makes it so difficult to respond to it, to show leadership around it, and it prevents people from coming forward to be tested.

JACKIE JUDD: In the report that's out today one of the surveys it cited comes out of India with 70% of the people who were surveyed who have HIV/AIDS say they have been discriminated against either by other family members or by professionals in the healthcare industry. Is that number unique to India because of where that country is in the crisis? Because of the particular culture? Or do you think it's more typical?

DR. PETER PIOT: Well, I've not been yet in a country where people with HIV are not stigmatized or discriminated. But the degree to which it exists is highly variable. In India for example it is higher than in countries in Africa where people are far more familiar with it, where far more people have died, have come out. And so the stigma is also related to fear of the unknown and to the fact that we don't know anybody personally. Once it's in the family it becomes far more part of life - normal life.

JACKIE JUDD: You had said before we started that there was some good news stories out there to report. What are some of them?

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DR. PETER PIOT: It's - there is not only doom and gloom. Of course the epidemic continues to expand. No doubt about that. But we also have some good news. The good news is that - on the one hand that political leadership and the leadership in businesses, churches, so on, is higher than ever before. We've never seen it actually, right, in the 20 years since the epidemic. Secondly there's far more money than before. When we started with UNAIDS seven years ago, about \$200 million was spent on AIDS in developing countries and poor nations. This year this will be around \$4-1/2 billion spent. And thirdly is that we have good evidence now prevention success is possible. In Uganda we see again that less people become infected this year than ten years ago. But also in cities like Kigali in Rwanda and Addis Abeba in Ethiopia, less people become infected and that's particularly true for young people. So success is possible. This is a problem with a solution.

JACKIE JUDD: I have seen in other interviews that you've done you've made the point that at the top level of government doors are open today that were not open seven years ago. But you've also been quoted as saying that the denial and lack of urgency by some governments hurts the effort. And so I guess I'd like to know which side wins more often in the global sense?

DR. PETER PIOT: What we are seeing today is that in

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Africa for example there is not a single head of state who doesn't know that AIDS is a top national priority. And - because they have family members themselves who have died. People are dying in their communities. And so there we're seeing really that action is taken and the biggest problem now is to make sure the money is there and to make sure that systems are being put in place. Outside Africa that's a big difference. I would say in the Caribbean great leadership but also some denial. But when I go to Asia only now is the awareness that AIDS is going to become a big problem for Asia if that continues to grow now. And we're seeing that in capitols in Beijing in China or in Delhi in India, that there is awareness. But that's certainly not penetrated everywhere.

JACKIE JUDD: Well, in your experience what are the stages of political leaders - that they go through before they reach the point that you think they need to be to move towards progress?

DR. PETER PIOT: Political leaders - any individual in private society go basically through the same stages when it comes to AIDS. First there is this can't be true. In other words -

JACKIE JUDD: Denial.

DR. PETER PIOT: - denial. Denial. It's not true. This is how many of us react when there is a really bad problem that we're confronted with. That's human. And then the next

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stage is more, okay, we've got some problem there but at least it is bad people or it's foreigners. It's everybody except us. Except me, except mainstream people. So that's the stage where I would say it's rejection, it's discrimination, it's the others. And it's only, let's say, the third stage that we say, well, we are part of the problem. We do have the problem and therefore we are part of the solution also and we've got to confront this problem. And that's where we are in now in many societies today in Africa, in the Caribbean. Less so in Eastern Europe, less so in Asia.

JACKIE JUDD: You come back frequently to the issue of money and I'm going to ask you about money. One of the larger programs being discussed these days is the World Health Organization's three by five. Three million people treated by 2005. The cost estimate is about \$5 billion. I think that does not include infrastructure?

DR. PETER PIOT: Right.

JACKIE JUDD: How realistic is the goal? I want to underline realism.

DR. PETER PIOT: Over the last two years we have a totally different approach to the AIDS epidemic than before. Before it was prevention, prevention, prevention, and of course that remains absolutely vital so people don't become infected. But gradually also we've come to understand that you can't really win the fight without also making sure that those who

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are already infected after all, over 40 million people, that they have access to treatment, that their lives are prolonged, that they have better quality of life. And that's one of the reasons that the World Health Organization has launched this three by five target. Three million people treated by 2005. This is a global goal. This is a mobilizer. This means that we will do collectively everything we can to make sure that people are put on treatment in the developing world.

JACKIE JUDD: Do you think that there will be -

DR. PETER PIOT: And I think if we all work together - and in the first place where will the money come from? In the first place from the U.S. From the presidential initiative on HIV/AIDS, which has a goal to put two million people on treatment in the next three years. And so it's a goal that cannot be achieved by one single institution but by all of them. Whether we will get there by the end of 2005, that will depend what we do today. What I'm sure of is that far more people will be treated and that that will be in the news.

JACKIE JUDD: If you were to come back here December 1st, 2004, what would you like to be able to say about those 12 months as regards fighting this epidemic?

DR. PETER PIOT: A year from now, December 1st, (unintelligible) 2004, I'd like to see first of all that there are more countries in Africa, outside Africa, where less people become infected than they are. And particularly young people.

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Secondly that we will see hundreds of thousands of those who are infected and need treatment, that they've had access to lifesaving antiretroviral therapy. And thirdly that the money, the resources, that are being mobilized against AIDS will have been well spent, that they reach those needed patients in the community.

JACKIE JUDD: (Unintelligible).

DR. PETER PIOT: If you ask me what I want to see -

JACKIE JUDD: In a year. Dr. Piot, thank you. Peter Piot is the Executive Director of UNAIDS and I'm Jackie Judd with the Kaiser Network.

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