

Daily Roundup: Monday, August 4, 2008

At the XVII International AIDS conference in Mexico City, more than 25,000 scientists, advocates as well as community and political leaders gathered under the theme of "Universal Action Now."

UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot, M.D., Ph.D. set the stage, pointing to encouraging successes in the battle against the disease. "For the first time fewer people are dying of AIDS," said Piot. "For the first time fewer people are becoming infected with HIV. For the first time, we have empirical evidence that our brilliant coalition can move mountains a unique and diverse coalition present here in this auditorium. This is cause for great encouragement, but it is not cause for complacency and it is certainly far too early for declaring victory, because the end of AIDS is nowhere in site."

Alex Coutinho, MD, MSc, MPH, Executive Director of the Infectious Diseases Institute in Kampala, Uganda agreed there are still many challenges ahead. "We should not accept that less than 10% of individuals at-risk for HIV like sex workers, IDU, MSM and prisoners and developing countries are receiving appropriate prevention interventions," said Coutinho. "We should not accept that PMTCT a proven and effective prevention technology is not the highest of global and national priorities to reduce HIV transmission to children to below 2%. We should not accept that proven methods of HIV prevention like male circumcision are yet to be deployed in most countries that need them including those where the research has been carried out. We should not accept that we cannot provide HIV testing to all who need it."

Add to the list a shortage of health care workers and health systems in disrepair faced by many of the countries overburdened with the epidemic. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton said, "In some African nations nearly 3 in 4 people with HIV are infected with TB. It doesn't make sense to ask these men, women and children to go to two clinics with two doctors and two pharmacies and two strategies to treat one person who has enough problems as it is. We must do more to centralize the delivery of all kinds of quality health care."

Julio Frenk, the former Health Minister of Mexico and now with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation described how his country incorporated HIV/AIDS in its overall health reform efforts. "Health care cannot be seen as a commodity or privilege but as a social right," said Frenk. "In the case of AIDS, this meant not only assuring universal coverage, but also launching an open battle to fight stigma, violence against women and homophobia. To this effect, Mexico amended its Constitution and passed laws to prevent and punish any type of discrimination."

Just in the past few years treatment scale-up has been dramatic now with more than three million people on antiretroviral drugs.

“I’d like to show you the photograph, the image of a seven year old weighing less than a one year old baby, suffering from full blown AIDS,” said singer and songwriter Annie Lennox, who advocated increasing access to treatment, especially for women and children. “And five months later when we went to see her when she’d received decent medical care, loving care, decent nutrition, treatment, that’s the same child. This is a huge symbol of the kind of positive changes that can be made. This is the positive message that can come out of the African AIDS pandemic with access to treatment, good nutrition, decent medical health care. This is what surely we’d all like to see.”

While getting treatment to markedly more patients remains a key pillar in the HIV/AIDS strategy, prevention efforts must keep pace, according to Jaime Sepulveda, MD MPH, DrSc, MSc, Director of Integrated Health Solutions Development in the Global Health Program at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “For every five people who became infected and will die without ever accessing treatment,” said Sepulveda. “I would suggest to you that one way of knowing that we have turned the corner is to look for the day when more people are starting on treatment than are newly infected with HIV.”

Also today, leaders from the U.S. black community called for a domestic response equal to that their government has given overseas. This after a report from the Black AIDS Institute found some similarities in severity between the AIDS epidemic in black America and many countries served by the U.S. Global AIDS Initiative. U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Lee said, “Where’s our PEPFAR for the U.S.? We need a domestic AIDS response that brings new resources to an effort that has been virtually flat funded for years. We need a domestic AIDS response that is oriented around a clear and ambitious objective around reducing HIV infection rates, increasing access to care and reducing racial and ethnic disparities.”

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