

FONDATION MERIEUX

REPORT ON A COLLOQUIUM ON AIDS

ANNECY, FRANCE

20 - 21 JUNE 1987

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MICHAEL KIRBY*

In late June 1987 an unprecedented galaxy of Nobel scientists, leading philosophers, historians and other experts came together near Geneva. The purpose was to advise the World Health Organisation on strategies to combat the global menace of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. One of the experts invited was Justice MICHAEL KIRBY of Australia. Here is his report on the meeting.

Lake Annecy in France is a jewel. Rousseau once described it as the type of place you go to to reassure yourself that life is worthwhile. An odd place, it might be thought, for a high level meeting on AIDS. Surrounded by the beauties of lake and mountains and not far from the Swiss border, a rare intellectual panorama collected mid June to talk about AIDS, life and death.

Most of the guests were housed, in the French style, in a 14th century abbey, now a grand hotel. This was the hotel to which "Baby Doc" Duvalier fled for the succour of France after he was ousted from Haiti. In earlier times the abbey had closed its doors to lepers, victims of the Plague and the other waves of infection which recurred in European history. Now the doors were open to a gathering of some of the worlds finest intellects, concentrating their minds on a new pandemic - perhaps the most dangerous of them all.

Sitting in the front row at the opening session was

Professor David Baltimore: bearded, serious. He looks like a man with a short fuse and duly proves impatient with many of his colleagues. Awarded the Nobel Prize at age 37 for his work on molecular biology, Baltimore just happened to be working on retroviruses at the right time. His research has become critical to the survival of millions of mankind. He wears his awesome responsibility lightly. There too is Jonas Salk. Soft spoken, gentle, the conqueror of polio is still turning his considerable intellect to the baffling new virus of AIDS. The common assumption is that a vaccine is useless once a person has already been exposed to a viral infection. But AIDS is different, insists Salk. It has an unusually long period of latency during which the subject is apparently symptom free. Maybe a vaccine could be developed, he speculates, to take account of this special feature of AIDS and to offer hope to the millions of people already infected with the virus.

"WE NEED THE MANHATTEN SPIRIT"

Sitting next to Salk and Baltimore is another American, Dr. Bill Haseltine of the Harvard Medical School. His research suggests that a protein on the outside of the AIDS virus causes the cells essential to the body's immune rejection of disease to turn on themselves and to "fuse". Haseltine, a fierce eyed, but vigorous scientist alternates between gloom and optimism. Gloom because the figures of those dying amongst the patients who test positive grows with every year of more experience. It is now about 27% and some say that all who are infected die or suffer profoundly. But optimism because at least we know the structure of the virus - something which is only possible because of years of pure research. If we had not done that

research, we would all just be watching in horror and puzzlement at the grim toll. What we really need, declared Haseltine, is the same spirit of determination evidenced in the Manhattan Project which developed the first atom bomb. The tools are there. He is optimistic about a vaccine and a cure. Privately he voices scepticism about Jonas Salk's ideas.

Mentioned in muted undertones is the grim scenario of Harvard's Professor Gould. Without blinking an eye, Gould recently wrote in the New York Times that a quarter of mankind may die of AIDS before the disease has run its course.

Apart from Robert Gallo, everyone who is anyone in the pantheon of AIDS science is there. Fifty scientists, historians and philosophers called together in an idyllic lakeside setting for three days to help the World Health Organisation develop its strategies, in what is shaping up to be its greatest challenge. Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in Paris shares with Gallo the claim to have first isolated the AIDS virus. He is a short man with a very Gallic face. His close cropped hair sets off a gentle expression. He moves between the participants with grace and elegance. But when he gets up to speak it is soon apparent why he and Gallo are billed for a future Nobel Prize. Montagnier is at pains to stress how wrong and irrelevant it is to "blame" Africa as the origin of AIDS. It might just as easily, he declared, have been an American epidemic carried to Africa by the troops who went there in the many recent African wars. The most puzzling thing, according to Montagnier, is the mode of transmission of the virus. Why should it attack such different groups in the West (where mainly homosexuals and drug addicts are affected) and in Africa

(where heterosexual transmission is the rule)? Perhaps, he speculated, a reservoir of AIDS was about for a long time, just waiting for the technological and social conditions to emerge, as they have now.

Gloomily presiding over the first scientific session was another Nobel laureate, Francois Jacob who won his prize for Medicine. Jacob is also of the Pasteur Institute. He was not as confident as the "can do" Americans about an early breakthrough to a vaccine or a cure. The basic problem is that this virus attacks the defence system. Other viruses do not do so. This feature of the AIDS virus presents the greatest challenge to the scientists and drug companies queuing for the millions at stake in AIDS research. Three Nobel heads nod gravely in recognition of Jacob's simple statement of the basic scientific problem.

MYTHS OF SEX WITH GREEN MONKEYS

Around this cluster of laureates and laureates-to-be gathers a small crowd of other contributors. On the side-lines appear the anxious faces of a powerful team of international civil servants who have motored into Annecy from Geneva where the World Health Organisation has its headquarters. Foremost amongst these is Jonathan Mann, a fast talking American scientist who is now the head of the WHO special program on AIDS. Mann's priority concern, he admits frankly, is Africa. There millions are probably already infected. Most African Governments will not report the extent of their problem. In part this is simply because of poverty. Just to perform the test for AIDS costs roughly what the poor countries of Africa spend each year per capita on public health. But in part the

African Governments' reticence stems from a fear of driving away tourists vital for their economic survival. Kenya's tourist trade is already said to be halved this year. There is still another consideration. This is African anger at the suggestions in some Western media that Africa is to "blame" for the spread of AIDS. It is true that the first recorded case of the AIDS virus appears in a 1957 sample of blood from Zaire. It is also true that a condition like AIDS has been known to exist in the green monkey of Central Africa for many years. The "thin disease" as AIDS is known throughout Africa was probably there for a long time before the recurring cases in the United States led to the coining of the now fearsome acronym of AIDS in 1981. But it is the lurid stories about sexual promiscuity between Africans and green monkeys which have angered the African Governments. This thesis, biologically unlikely, is sufficient vivid to get broad media coverage. In fact there are a lot of myths about AIDS. They are dismissed derisively by the scientists in Annecy - a germ from outer space, an invention of the CIA are just as contemptible as talk of "God's wrath". Nevertheless, everyone recognises that precisely because of the sexual mode of most transmission - homosexual and heterosexual - AIDS as a cause of death taps deep seated passions.

"SODOMY IS TO BLAME"

"Sodomy is to blame. Let's call a spade a spade", demands Professor Helene Ahrweiler of the University of Paris. Her blunt declaration to this effect at the end of her review of epidemic diseases in the Middle Ages causes a wave of shock to pass through the room. At the international conference in Washington a fortnight earlier there would have been a protest

- even perhaps a walkout. The response at Annecy was milder, more restrained. Ronald Bayer, an articulate philosopher from the prestigious Hastings Center on Ethics in New York led the counter-charge. There was absolutely no evidence of anal intercourse in Africa where AIDS is probably most prevalent. There it is virtually exclusively a heterosexual condition. Moreover, there will be no hope of successfully tackling public education in the groups particularly at risk in Western countries (including homosexuals) if "value laden words" like "sodomy" are used. To change behaviour, declared Bayer, it is essential to win the confidence of the gay groups and intravenous drug users who feel imperilled and see their friends dying about them every week. For once the ethically desirable course happens, according to Bayer, to coincide with the interests of the majority heterosexual community. They will not be immune from AIDS, as Africa demonstrates. Heterosexual drug addicts and prostitutes may become the "vectors" to spread this disease into the wider community. However that may be, common humanity and self protection require practical measures of prevention, not Old Testament moralising. There is no vaccine and no cure. Perhaps there never will be. Incredible as it may seem in this age, AIDS may even defy man's skills. Therefore all our efforts must be addressed to stopping the spread of the virus. Condoms, clean needles for drug users, a ban on the proliferation of multiple disposal needles throughout Africa and Latin America - these are what is needed.

THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND JABS WITH SEVEN NEEDLES!

A shocked audience hears Professor Henri Mollaret of Paris describe a recent campaign of vaccination in Zaire where

no fewer than 300,000 people were "successfully" jabbed with just seven needles! Little wonder that Africa will probably be the nadir of AIDS. Professor Kapita of the main hospital in Kinshasa in Zaire was expected to be at the meeting. But he did not turn up. Rumour had it that his Government was becoming anxious about adverse publicity which his grim pictures of death and wasting away were causing outside of Africa. In his absence, it fell to Jonathan Mann to tell the devastating tale of AIDS in Africa. More than 4,000 cases reported in 26 countries to the end of May 1987. But obviously a gross under estimate - millions probably infected. Graphs were produced vividly showing the steep curve of the rise in reported cases of AIDS in many countries. Up and up it suddenly rises. There was only one true analogy according to Professor Stephen Graubard of the United States. It was the First World War when, suddenly, young people died in their thousands. Then too, whole communities were afflicted. No town was untouched by death and suffering. People who had so much to offer were struck down in their most promising years. Soberly Graubard concluded his remarks with the warning that at this stage there was no sure sign that an Armistice lay beckoning four years off.

Was there any good news about AIDS? Yes there was. Madame Michele Barzach, the French Health Minister in the Rightist Government of M. Chirac opened the meeting. Like Health Ministers in Australia and New Zealand, Madame Barzach has approved the ready supply of clean needles to drug addicts. No questions asked. The French Government is also in the midst of a war against drugs. But preserving life and halting the spread of AIDS must now come first. Young, intelligent and dressed in

a striking red costume, Madame Barzach charmed the scientists and philosophers. I overheard one Nobel Laureate lament that there was no equivalent political talent "back home". AIDS is not a punishment, the French Minister warned. Politicians have no real chance of dictating behaviour in such intimate activities as sexual relations and drug taking. Our societies just do not work that way. But, she warned, the sheer economic burden which AIDS would impose on society would build up a head of pressure for dramatic political responses. So it is a race between scientific achievement and popular prejudice.

Cost estimates of the impact of AIDS were offered by Professor Howard Hiatt, longtime Dean of the Harvard Medical School. According to his figures, by 1991 the total direct and indirect costs of AIDS for the U.S. economy alone will be \$66 billion a year. Yet he predicted that some good might come out of this. At long last, a universal national health service would become inevitable for the United States. And the very dimension of the problem would force politicians to vote funds for pure research in order to tackle AIDS. Neglect of pure research for 20 years by most Western Governments, in their demand for "practical science" was now reaping its grim harvest. Had it not been for a few inquisitive pure scientists like Baltimore, we would just have no hope of beating AIDS. Think of that the next time you hear politicians insisting on immediate returns for science investment.

Another offshoot of the sheer economic toll of AIDS in so many Western countries is likely to be the "spin off" effects in medical research. If we can cure this, it was said, we can cure anything - even cancer. For once David Baltimore was

cautious. The AIDS virus is variable. But it is just a virus. We have conquered viruses in the past. We will do so with the AIDS virus. But cancer is infinitely more complex. That is a reason for hope of a cure for AIDS - but for caution about the miracles which that cure might lead to.

A FIRST WORLD WAR - WITH NO SURE ARMISTICE

Like a great symphony, the conference debate moved from the physical to the social sciences and back again. French and British philosophers and historians made their contributions. Was AIDS analogous to the great plagues which swept Europe, first recorded by Thucydides in 430 BC? Many speakers cautioned against this analogy. Rene Girard, a Frenchman now a professor at Stanford University in the United States, rejected the analogy with the Plague. Our populations are not now so ignorant. We know the causes of this new disaster. We also know the means of prevention. Better by far, he declared, to draw an analogy with the spread of syphilis and gonorrhoea in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. These too were sexually transmitted. They were tackled, not with public alarm and panic, but by the opening of clinics for confidential advice and treatment. The early treatment was primitive - just as is the early treatment of AIDS. But talk of the plague was a media hype which should be discouraged.

But is AIDS new? Professor Mirko Grmek of the Sorbonne in Paris suggested that Dr. Karposi's first description of his now terrifying sarcoma amongst a few Jewish patients in Budapest at the turn of the century might be evidence that AIDS has long existed, but in a closed reservoir. Was it the explosion of sexual energies in Europe in the 1960s and the massive use of

needles and vaccines in Africa, allied to international air travel which precipitated the present pandemic? Amazingly enough, tales were told of some children in Africa who receive up to 40 vaccine injections in a single year. In Haiti it was reported that 12,000 "professional" vaccinators go around using their dirty needles - spreading death from person to person. Imitating Western medicine, they pander to the faith of an innocent population. They have become the modern witch doctors. Their multitudinous jabs spread a deadly virus.

AN ATLANTIC DIVIDE

It was at this point that a divide as wide as the Atlantic appeared between some of the participants. It's no use talking about "sexual relations", said Professor Mollaret of the Pasteur Institute. We must be more direct. It's "sodomy that spreads this virus". He referred to experiments with rabbits. Subjected to repeated injections of sperm into the rectum, they demonstrate depression of the immune system. He speculated that not only had there been an explosion of homosexual activity of this kind since the 60s. There had also been a great increase in anal intercourse amongst heterosexuals.

The responses from State-side to this assertion were derisory. How come, asked the laconic Ronald Bayer, that centuries of homosexual intercourse had not produced AIDS until now? It is infected semen, rather than semen itself, that is the cause of AIDS. Scientists, including Baltimore, scotched Mollaret's hypothesis. True it is anal intercourse is a more "efficient" means of transmitting the virus. But vaginal intercourse had also proved perfectly efficient in Africa. The wide-spread theory that the Africans themselves must engage in

anal intercourse was completely discounted by all reliable observers. Manuel Carballo, a top WHO official urged the complete avoidance of value-laden words like "sodomy". They would do nothing to contribute to changing behaviour in at-risk groups. Carballo's greatest achievement to date has been in getting rid of breast milk substitute powders sold by multinationals throughout Africa. Now, in the face of the perinatal transmission of AIDS by breast feeding, he faces the grim necessity to contemplate a complete reversal of his work of the past decade. At least the powders don't pass AIDS.

So the conference ran on. Was AIDS a form of mass suicide, as one French philosopher asked? Rubbish, said Bayer. The so-called "suicidal" conduct long preceded AIDS. No one had suggested then that it was a form of self hatred or hatred of society. David Baltimore cautioned that society, by driving stigmatised groups into closed circuits, had defined the only common links they had by reference to behaviour now risky. Society would perhaps reap what it had for so long sown.

The spotlight then fell upon the media. How had it reacted to AIDS? Some French critics suggested that the media had neglected the epidemic at first and then scrambled with one lurid headline after another. "Gran killed by Gay Bug" was an American instance cited. Television, especially, came in for criticism. But what more could be expected of a medium devoted to moving pictures and entertainment? To the defence of the print media sprang Howard Simons, a sharp tongued ex chief of the powerful Washington Post. He had piloted that influential journal through Watergate but later left it to teach at Harvard. Given that the media's educational mission is not

education as such, the American media had certainly told the public the basic facts. The insistence on facts was clearly Simons' Bible. With apparent pride he recounted the insistence of the Post in printing that the cause of the death of a U.S. Congressman was AIDS. As he spoke, the mind vacillated. Was this an unwanted invasion of the privacy of the Congressman's family? Or was it a necessary fact, to bring home the universality of this killer? Truth is always best, thundered Simons. A few French and British philosophers looked sceptical.

CRIMSON LADIES IN A HAITIAN BROTHEL

Towards the close of the meeting Professor Richard Selzer of Yale rose to tell of a recent research visit to a Haitian brothel. There he had interviewed three prostitutes. He vividly described how they received him in their dresses of red taffeta and silk. And how they flurried them angrily when he questioned them about AIDS. No, they did not know anyone with AIDS. Yes, it was a plot by President Reagan to destroy the little trade they had. Everyone knew he hated the Latin Americans. Were some of the girls thin? Yes. But they just wont eat. "How do you expect to keep well, if you don't eat?" Selzer's poignant pen picture of AIDS striking at poor prostitutes with nothing else to offer than their bodies hushed this great audience of scientists and philosophers. Would their clients use condoms? Never. It is just not the culture. Same thing in Africa. Condoms cost money. They are forbidden by the Church. Never used. Just more and more wasting away. The infection spreads. Millions are being caught up in its web.

Jonas Salk quietly drew two graphs. One portrayed again the projected rise of cases of AIDS. The other showed the

projection of gross world population. The slippery dip patterns were uncannily similar. For the scientist, the dispassionate question must be asked. Does Malthus still live? Is AIDS just the reproof of evolution to our global population ill balance? Could this be right? The Asians are the source of the greatest population explosion. Yet recent British research suggests an apparent genetic resistance to AIDS amongst Asian people. It would be a cruel and indiscriminating logic to kill off Africans and others in the world to redress excess population in Asia. But who says evolution must be logical or kind? The dinosaur didn't think it so.

Richard Selzer's evocation of the three red clad figures in Haiti took my mind back to the Court of Criminal Appeal in Sydney where, in May 1987, with two colleagues also dressed in crimson, a case came forward involving a prisoner with AIDS. I was wakened from this reverie. For it was now my turn to contribute to this meeting. I talked of the laws which had been passed on AIDS and of other laws yet to come. How can we target laws that will work upon such private behaviour, I was asked. So far, only Saudi Arabia has imposed a form of national quarantine - requiring foreigners to produce certificates of freedom from the virus to gain entry. But other countries are now talking of just this approach. Even as we were meeting, the hospital authorities in Geneva, 50 kilometres away, were deciding to impose mandatory tests for AIDS on all their patients. Politicians like M. Le Pin in France were calling for extreme measures as the toll of dead and dying from AIDS rises. Society's response will become increasingly unsympathetic. If you are in doubt, look at the way earlier contagions were dealt

with. Civilised people must speak out against the dangers. We should avoid inefficient and oppressive laws, I urged. Will society itself change in the process? That was the question posed by Stephen Graubard. Just as World War I altered the world for ever, so, he speculated, would AIDS.

Ronald Bayer urged optimism. For once, anti discrimination coincides with the self interest of mankind. The only way to stop the AIDS infection, at least in the West and until there is a vaccine or a cure - is by winning over the stigmatised groups and promoting amongst them education for their own sake - and for all our sakes.

It started to rain in Annecy. The buses arrived to scatter the participants to the four corners of the world. Jonathan Mann declared that the discussions had been useful to WHO. We must continue the dialogue was his theme. There is a need for dialogue between the international bureaucrats who will be in the front line of this world wide struggle and the leaders of the natural and social sciences in every country.

"LET HIM SPEAK!"

Mann's closing reflections took my mind back to an electric moment that had occurred two weeks earlier at the international conference on AIDS in Washington. There 6,000 people gathered to discuss this melancholy subject. They reviewed the data. They considered the progress and the problems. There was some encouraging news. The AZT drug was promising as a first drug. It had serious side effects. But it seemed, in many cases, to arrest the debilitating effect of the AIDS virus in its most active phase. But it cost \$10,000 a year. The prospects of its availability in the villages of

Africa seemed remote. Yes it was a start, Baltimore reminded us. Such early success was encouraging.

In Washington there was also bad news. Growing levels of AIDS affected patients. Growing levels of death amongst those who tested positive. Still persisting numbers of high risk groups ignoring the basic rudiments necessary for avoiding the infection.

In this mood of sombre anxiety, a spokesman for the Moral Majority had risen in a session in Washington which I was chairing. In a voice tinged with emotion he attacked the "horrible practices" of homosexuals and drug addicts. They were a scourge on society. He suggested that AIDS was the retribution of an angry God. The audience of international scientists became restive. Ultimately an outpouring of booing occurred. Hissing filled the room. Pandemonium seemed near. And then a remarkable thing happened. A representative of the New York Gay Activist Group in the front row leaped to his feet. "Let him speak!" he shouted. The big hall fell into silence.

THE AIDS BELL'S MELANCHOLY TOLL

Later this man explained his action. "I hated what he was saying. But as an American, I was ashamed that he was not being heard. If we demand the right to be heard we must listen too. Otherwise one day we may be booed and hissed and even worse".

Jonathan Mann says that Nobel scientists must talk - and intellectuals from many lands must help guide the WHO in this unprecedented challenge to its mission for a healthy world. "Let us speak" was his recurring theme. It captured the mood of the participants who gathered on the shore of Lake Annecy in the middle of 1987. The longest day passed in the rain. AIDS is still with us. The grim plight will leave few completely

untouched before it is overcome. The dialogue must continue on all levels. And it must be a dialogue tinged with compassion for the human lives that will be lost - and the friends, children and loved ones who will suffer. Ask not for whom the AIDS bell tolls. It tolls for us all.

*Justice Michael Kirby is President of the Court of Appeal of New South Wales, Australia. From 1975 to 1984 he was Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission. He is a Commissioner of the International Commission of Jurists.