

AIDS IN AUSTRALIA

FOREWORD

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Michael Kirby \*

In the face of AIDS we must all be humble. In the poet Yeats's words no conventional phrase will do. Humble because, as human beings, we thought we were masters of the universe. Did we not send spaceships to Mars? Have we not walked on the Moon? Did we not split the atom producing a flash brighter than a thousand Suns? Did we not conquer the sound barrier? Was human life not begun *in vitro*, by human intervention? Was there any malady which was beyond the skills of our scientific ingenuity to tame?

Now, suddenly, our mortal incapacities are shown in sharp relief. When we thought we were the conquerors of the scourges which had beset humanity over the centuries, suddenly we are faced with a new epidemic. The very ease of modern travel brings with it the rapid spread of a tiny virus. Today, no nook or cranny of the world is safe from HIV. It is truly a global disaster. Humanity's pride is brought down by a virus we can only see with the help of space-age technology.

We must be humble because of the impact of HIV/AIDS on ordinary human beings, everywhere in the six continents. Think of the countless men and women along the trucking routes of Africa.

To their lot of famine and poverty is now added AIDS. A Ugandan colleague recently said to me: *It is just not fair. Africa has suffered enough.* Think of the infected sex worker, scraping together a meagre living in a brothel in Northern Thailand. She came from Burma to find freedom and instead found a terrible illness. Think of the lonely IV drug user contemplating his fate in a park in Genoa. Think of the unfortunate patient isolated from his family in a Cuban sanatorium. Think of the gay man in San Francisco who emigrated there from the oppression of the mid-West town of his birth only to find that liberation was bought at an unexpected and terrible cost. Think of our own friends in terraces of Paddington in Sydney, Carlton in Melbourne and other places in Australia. All around the world, our brothers and sisters are suffering. In the face of such suffering we must mobilize science, strengthen community education and reach out with practical help. Every moral person must play his or her part to reduce the burden of HIV/AIDS.

This book is aimed at health care workers seeking to inform themselves about the issues raised by the epidemic. It is also targeted at senior undergraduate students. For the lives of this audience it is likely that HIV/AIDS will always be with us. Both nationally and globally, its challenge will increase. It will call forth the traditional strengths of health care providers. For the time being, they will have to work without a silver bullet to provide a cure and without a vaccine to provide protection to themselves and their patients.

At the most recent meeting of the Global Commission on

AIDS in Geneva in mid-1991, a new member, Professor Howard Temin, a Nobel Laureate, predicted that an effective vaccine may be found in less than ten years. The prospects of a simple cure seem much further away - assuming one will ever be found. These considerations make it likely that the rôle of the health care worker for the foreseeable future will be helping the infected; supporting their families and friends; and educating the community. The ever present danger of burnout will require particular efforts to be addressed to rekindle the dedication that will be necessary to deal with the problems of HIV/AIDS. Health care workers who see the devastation which HIV/AIDS can cause must become evangelists for community awareness and civic support for those who are touched by the virus.

At the same meeting in Geneva, the projections for the spread of the epidemic painted a particularly gloomy picture for Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. There, AIDS has always been a condition of the majority, heterosexual community. It was estimated that, by the turn of the century, ten million Africans will be infected. In our natural concerns about friends closer to home, we should not forget the impact of this epidemic around the world. Truly, this is a global problem. Fortunately, it has produced a global response.

Not all of the news is bad and gloomy. The self-same figures on projected infections show a flattening out of sero-conversions to HIV in Australia. The bipartisan policy of Federal and State Health Ministers which concentrated on candid public health education seems to have reaped a reward in the saving of lives which even the Grim Reaper may not

have expected. Although there have been many failings, it is remarkable to think of the progress our country has made in explicit discussion of sexual transmission and in enlightened strategies to prevent contamination from infected drug equipment. In many ways, Australia's enlightenment led the world. What a contrast is our tale to that of the United States. President Reagan could not bring himself to mention the word AIDS for the first five years of his Presidency, in an epicentre of the epidemic.

After initial lethargy, there is now a tremendous scientific effort to find a vaccine and treatments for HIV/AIDS. Already some progress has been made. More is surely around the corner. Out of this huge scientific endeavour will doubtless come many benefits for the treatment of other conditions besides HIV/AIDS. The urgency of finding a vaccine and effective treatment means that advances in medicine will be telescoped to the likely benefit of humanity generally.

Then there is the global cooperation which HIV/AIDS has produced. People of different religions and social attitudes are cooperating in the World Health Organisation to combat what is seen as an enemy of all mankind.

Finally, there are the human stories of courage. Of people living with AIDS. Of the friends and families who support them. Of the medical practitioners and other health care workers who are returning courageously and selflessly to the old mission of the healing professions.

Out of the catastrophe of AIDS will come many changes. In learning to cope with AIDS, we may become a more enlightened and humane society. To all those who read this

book and are encouraged by it to play a part in the global and national struggle against HIV/AIDS I express admiration and humble gratitude.

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