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AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

WORLD AIDS DAY 1 DECEMBER 1992

SHARING THE CHALLENGE

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The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG

Trustee of the AIDS Trust of Australia

Former Commissioner of the WHO Global Commission on AIDS

This is World AIDS Day. Every year, on this day, we pause and reflect upon the AIDS epidemic. We think of its toll in human suffering. We ponder the challenges ahead. And we resolve upon the responses, global and local, which are necessary to turn the tide of this epidemic.

For most of us it is just a day - or even a moment - in our busy lives in which to think about a theoretical problem which seems remote from us. But for others, living with AIDS in the four corners of the earth, there are 365 AIDS days, not just one.

In 1969 the Surgeon General of the United States declared that humanity could close its book on infectious diseases. Humanity had won the battle against pestilence, he declared. We could now turn to chronic challenges such as heart disease and cancer.

Unexpectedly, as if out of nowhere, came AIDS and HIV, the virus which causes its spread. This teaches us once again the unpredictability of human existence and the need for humility about our human achievements.

Last week I was in Strasbourg for a session of an international tribunal. At the end of a busy day I stole away from my colleagues.

Through the darkening countryside of Alsace I drove to a little town, more German than French in its appearance. On both sides of the road were the cemeteries of numberless soldiers who had fallen earlier in global struggles over that blood-soaked piece of land between France and Germany. In the corner of a little churchyard I found the grave of my friend. For the statistician, he is but another digit in the global pandemic of AIDS. But for his parents and friends he was a human being whose life ended prematurely and unexpectedly because of AIDS. In the cold air beside the grave surrounded by the slopes on which the vines of Alsace grow, I paused once again to think about this epidemic; and to see it in personal terms. Only by this perspective will a prejudice be overcome. Only in this way will we redouble our efforts to save the coming generation from similar suffering - each one of us making our little contribution.

Yesterday, in time for World AIDS Day, I received the *Global Report on AIDS in the World* from my former colleagues on the Global Commission on AIDS, led by Dr Jonathan Mann. Its message is pretty sobering.

- \* At this time an estimated 13 million people world-wide have been infected;
- \* There has been a hundred-fold increase since HIV was discovered in 1981;
- \* Of the 13 million infected, 2½ million have developed AIDS. Most of them have died. By now there are few of us who do not know somebody who has died of AIDS or who has the virus; and
- \* In Australia more than 1500 of our fellow citizens have died. Estimates of infections vary but there must be more than 50,000 cases. Despite all the efforts and all the publicity, still every week reports of new infections come in.

If we are doing better than many countries, the picture on a global scale painted by this book is of an epidemic running out of control.

- \* Conservatively by the turn of the century 40 million adults will be infected and 10 million children. The grimmer scenario is of more than 100 million cases. And the most rapid growth is now occurring in the dense populations of Asia. Its countries will overtake the grim news of Central and South Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.
- \* Don't think that AIDS is just a problem for gay men, intravenous drug users and sex workers - the initial stigmatized groups. More than 70% of the reports world-wide are of ordinary heterosexual people infected.
- \* The most alarming evidence of 1992 is the rapid increase in infections amongst women. It has risen from 25% in 1990 to 40% already in early 1992. This shift has terrible implications for the infection of infants. AIDS is an equal opportunity killer: a microscopic virus which does not conveniently stop at minority groups and stigmatized people.

The theme of this year's World AIDS Day is sharing the challenge. But how can we do it with a problem so daunting?

- \* In America this year, the democratic process showed how. An Administration which talked but failed to act on AIDS, because of a professed adherence to "family values", was overthrown by a challenger who promised a new attack on the problem: like the one that overcame the polio virus forty years ago. During the campaign the issue became highly political. The new President's narrow margin of victory depended, in a critical way, upon those who came to see in him the rejection of

selfishness and indifference and a commitment to a return to a caring society in which one person's problem is truly shared by all.

\* In Australia, our politicians of differing political parties have done rather better. But reports released during the year show that a second epidemic of discrimination is upon us: fear and stigmatization is growing. Australians should not congratulate ourselves too much. We too have to learn to share the challenge.

\* And on the world stage, the year past has seen the first ever decline in the international resources provided by the wealthy nations to developing countries for prevention and control of AIDS. Only 6% of total global spending on AIDS prevention ends up in the developing world. Yet this accounts for over 80% of infections world-wide. We should pause to think of the predicament of:

- the infected truck-driver in Uganda;
- the sex worker in Burma who left her village to support her family;
- the lonely gay man, rejected by his family, in our own society.

We can share the challenge by basing our national and personal responses to AIDS upon a sound understanding of its nature and the limited modes of its transmission. And upon a commitment to respecting the human rights and dignity of those who carry this burden not on one day a year - but every day. Even in hard times, those who can should make a contribution to the AIDS Trust of Australia and to other bodies fighting this epidemic on three fronts:

- \* Helping the sick and their families.
- \* Educating the young and the still prejudiced.

\* And mobilising science which one day will commit this terrible virus to a footnote to human history.

In that footnote let it be said that we responded to a wholly unexpected challenge with global resolution and personal compassion. And that in the dark days all of us, in different ways, helped just a little to share the challenge of AIDS.