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SALUTATION BY THE
HON. MICHAEL KIRBY

User's News
NSW Users & AIDS Association Inc.

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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September 2010 marks the 21st anniversary of the NSW Users & AIDS Association. It was born in controversy and great peril. It has lived through two decades of resistance, doubt, animosity, opposition and patient support. Truly, it has come of age.

NUAA and its journal, by their longevity, demonstrate the Australian commitment to strategies of harm minimisation that recognise the AIDS paradox. Paradoxically, the most effective ways to combat the spread of HIV involve reaching out to, and protecting, those who are most at risk of infection. This includes injecting drug users (IJUs), who comprise one of the most vulnerable groups exposed to the virus. In some countries, IJUs are the most vulnerable and the most difficult to reach with messages essential to self-protection, and thus, community protection.

We, in Australia, took early and strong steps to engage with IJUs, including through NUAA and its journal. We owe a debt of gratitude to the far-sighted leaders of this country who embraced, implemented and sustained this strategy. At the outset, they included Dr. Neal Blewett (Minister for Health) and Professor Peter Baume (Shadow Minister).

The result of their innovative and courageous steps, supported in due course by NUAA and other similar bodies, was radically to reduce the risks of infection amongst IJUs in Australia. This was important not only for the people at greatest risk of infection, but drug users themselves. It was essential for their partners, families and the community generally. If we have much lower rates of sero-conversion in the IJU population in Australia than in many other countries, it is because of these strategies.

Now, other countries are seeking to learn from the Australian example. International agencies of the United Nations are striving to explain and communicate our experience and the changes in law, policy and social attitudes that it requires. In 2010, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (Helen Clark) established the Global Commission on HIV and the Law. I have been appointed a member of that Commission. Its first meeting will be held in Sao Paulo in October 2010. The objective of the Commission will be to identify those provisions of national laws, policies and practices that need to be changed if the world is serious about reducing the spread of HIV. Self-evidently, this will require attention to the strategies necessary to reduce infections amongst IJUs. In this way, the experience we have had in Australia may be of use to other countries where, so far, punitive and coercive measures have been imposed, generally without beneficial results from either a human rights or disease-control perspective.

I congratulate NUAA and all those who have stayed the course in the enterprise of harm reduction. Not only is this a course that involves respect for the human dignity of those greatly at risk. It is also the only course that carries a real prospect of reducing the spread of HIV.

One day, HIV will be conquered by human scientific inventiveness. In the meantime, there is much work to be done. And, in the course of engaging with IJUs, society may outgrow demonization of drug use and discover more effective strategies to promote the avoidance and reduction of the use of dangerous addictive drugs.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Kirby', written in a cursive style.

MICHAEL KIRBY
Member of the UNAIDS Reference Group
on HIV and Human Rights
Member of the UNDP Global Commission
on HIV and the Law
Gruber Justice Prize 2010