

3077

APCOM

PANDEMICS AND LGBTIQ RIGHTS: LESSONS
FROM HIV & COVID-19

The Hon. Michael Kirby

APCOM
PANDEMICS AND LGBTIQ RIGHTS: LESSONS FROM HIV &
COVID-19

The Hon. Michael Kirby*
APCOM Ambassador

COVID-19 is a virus that attacks the human species, including people who happen to members of sexual minorities. As the events of the last year have shown, millions of people, in all parts of the world, have been adversely affected; many have died.

The Novel Coronavirus, which WHO labelled “COVID-19”, has infected millions of people worldwide. For the increasing number of national leaders who urged policies to “go it alone”, and to reject multilateralism, this new pandemic has demonstrated the vital importance of international cooperation. Cooperation across the international community has been vital to a successful strategy against HIV. It is also vital for a successful strategy against COVID-19. Autocrats and harsh authoritarian regimes tend to be enemies to LGBTIQ people. It is not surprising that they are also hostile to sensible policies on HIV and COVID-19.

In fact, the lessons that the international gay community learned, with other sexual minorities, about HIV have been used by the most successful

* Former Australian Judge and commissioner of the WHO Global Commission on AIDS and of the UNDP Global Commission on HIV and the Law.

countries to tackle effectively the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unsurprising that many of the leaders (including many leading scientists) in the struggle against COVID-19 have been themselves LGBTIQ. They have cut their teeth on the HIV pandemic. They have led the way in strategies to tackle COVID-19. Those strategies have included :

- * Frank speaking about the pandemic and its essential features as a human virus and a common enemy of humanity;
- * Public engagement by politicians, alongside health experts, to tackle the pandemic without prejudice and discrimination for any particular minorities;
- * Use of modern media of communication to spread messages about effective and often simple strategies such as social distancing, handwashing and wearing masks;
- * Counteracting prejudice against minorities and insisting on common, shared dangers;
- * Reaching out to unpopular minorities (such as SOGI minorities, prisoners, sex workers and injecting drug users) for by helping them, we help each other and everyone and;
- * Emphasising the need to base all policies on sound scientific and empirical data, not prejudice or warped religious views.

Unfortunately, countries with governments that have expressed hostility to sexual minorities have often done the same to those on the frontline of COVID-19. These have included present administration in Brazil, the current regime in El Salvador; and the former administration of President Donald

Trump in the United States. Taking scientific advice only when it suits political agendas is a bad, and dangerous, course. Founding all policies for any pandemic on sound data and respected scientific opinion is a lesson that HIV taught LGBT people from the start. It is a lesson they have helped to teach the world during the response to COVID-19.

Occasionally, COVID-19 has had an unexpected but welcome silver lining. In a number of countries (including Australia) overcrowded prisons have seen their populations reduced. This has saved lives. There has been no significant increase in crime. Engaging with people at risk is the best way to tackle a pandemic. It is so much more effective than disrespecting people and locking them up as prospective political opponents.

Now there is a further area of operations where LGBT people have to teach a new generation. I refer to the availability of COVID-19 vaccines, on an equitable basis, so that they are available to all people everywhere on our planet according to need.

Not only is this essential for justice and global vaccine equity. It is also essential to the effectiveness to the operation of vaccines in creating an immunity. COVID-19, like HIV cannot be tackled and overcome entirely in a separate country. It is a global phenomenon. It requires global equity and cooperation.

Following the appearance of HIV, the well-resourced countries of the United States, Europe and Australasia contributed generously to the Global Fund against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and to PEPFAR. Millions of people

were placed on the antiretroviral therapies. The administration of the therapies became a major way to reduce the toll of the pandemic (therapy as prevention).

It will be the same with COVID-19. We will not secure the essential safety of our populations, nor will we get global flights transport and our economies operating again, unless we react as a global family. This is a lesson that has been emphasised repeatedly by the World Health Organisation and UNAIDS. At the World Health Assembly, most countries demanded a “people’s vaccine” so as to secure protection for the poorest victims of untreated COVID-19. Yet the reality is that vaccines are often unavailable to the needy in poorer countries.

Thus, LGBTIQ people in every land, who were on the frontline of the burden of HIV have become ambassadors for justice and equality in vaccine and therapy availability. Sexual minorities will consent to be oppressed no longer. They will speak up and sometimes act up in order to spread the message of health for all people by 2030. From being targets of discrimination and injustice, LGBTIQ people are increasingly vocal citizens with important experience to share. They speak up in their own countries. They lift their voices for justice throughout the world.