

HIV & NEW EPIDEMICS
WORLD AIDS DAY BOOKLET MESSAGE:

Michael Kirby

As we reflect on World AIDS Day 2022, and consider the progress towards HIV elimination, it is inevitable that we also reflect on two other epidemics that demand a public health response in our world at this time.

In 2020, COVID-19 sent us to isolation, affecting not only our social, interpersonal and sexual behaviours, but how we work, live and understand our place in the world. Whilst our borders were closed, we shared the sense of isolation. Variant after variant of COVID-19 presented new challenges. If we had not learned the lesson earlier, we came to understand that infectious diseases demand control strategies that must be global if they are to be effective.

Just when even the least optimistic of us began to think that perhaps we were through the worst of COVID-19, in 2022 we were faced with a new disease, monkeypox. Fortunately, the scale of this epidemic is still considerably smaller. However, because in Australia monkeypox predominantly affects gay and bisexual men, it brings with it an unsettling, and for those of us who lived through the HIV pandemic, all too familiar threat of stigma, fear and new anxiety.

Thankfully, these are different times. It has been reassuring to see community, government and research sectors promptly working together to protect not only the physical health of our communities, but also our mental and social health as well. As ultimately with HIV, we have ensured that science, proportion and common-sense drive our response to these new threats. All of us should support financially the great scientific and epidemiological institutes in Australia, as I have done, with the Kirby Institute. We cannot leave it to government to solve all our problems. I welcome philanthropic support to the Kirby Institute's TRaX study, which is generating the evidence to guide the public health response to monkeypox and to help prevent a major outbreak in Australia. We have been through this before, with HIV. We have learnt that Australian governments and biomedical research institutes can work together to protect lives and human wellbeing.

Considering these two very different epidemics, where do we now find ourselves with HIV?

In Australia, we can be proud of our efforts to prevent the further spread of HIV and to improve the health of people living with HIV. Last year, Australia recorded its lowest ever HIV numbers. While further work is still needed to ensure that reductions in transmissions continue across all populations, our success sends an important message that elimination of HIV transmission is within our reach.

It is this message that we must take to the global stage. Doing so, we must share not only our expertise and experience. As a country, we must also sustain and enhance our financial commitments towards global HIV elimination, especially in our neighbours.

In some countries, including in our region, new HIV infections are actually rising at an alarming rate. This is such that UNAIDS recently convened an emergency meeting on the HIV prevention. We learnt many lessons from the struggle against HIV in Australia. We must continue to share those lessons with others. We are all in this together.

On World AIDS Day 2022, we can therefore celebrate our successes in Australia. But as with COVID-19 and monkeypox, our work is not done until all people everywhere can access essential health services together with prevention strategies, treatments, vaccines and cures that we accept as our birthright in Australia. As World Pride arrives in Sydney in February 2023, it is a time to draw energy from our success, and to take that energy to the world. We can share the good news of how to get on top of pandemics. And we can share the expertise of our research institutes and thereby save lives and prevent avoidable suffering.

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG was a Commissioner of the WHO Global Commission on AIDS (1989-92); of the UNDP Global Commission on HIV and the Law (2011-12); and since 2011, Patron of the Kirby Institute within UNSW.