



World AIDS Day 1991 Observances Urge Sharing the Challenge

World AIDS Day, observed annually for the past four years on 1 December, is designated by the World Health Organization as a time to direct attention to and inform and educate the public about the ongoing international fight against AIDS. The theme of the most recent World AIDS Day, "Sharing the Challenge," encouraged the participation of public and private, governmental and nongovernmental, religious and secular agents and agencies in the provision of AIDS-related education, services, and advocacy.

Throughout the Region of the Americas many types of activities were carried out to educate the public on precautions that individuals can take to avoid infection, as well as to inform and sensitize people to broader issues such as tolerance and the health needs, social needs, and rights of those infected. Activities included press conferences, exhibitions, lectures, public concerts, television spots, and distribution of AIDS information at sporting and other events. In most countries these activities were not limited to one day, but consisted of a series of events extending from the last week of November into the first week of December.

In an address to the World AIDS Day ceremony held at the Headquarters of the World Health Organization in Geneva, Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of WHO, called on the world's political, spiritual, and intellectual leaders to take

up the challenges associated with the AIDS pandemic: first, to acknowledge the scope of the pandemic and make the commitment to not waste any more time in denial; second, to accept responsibility for responding urgently and effectively to the pandemic, in the realization that AIDS is not someone else's problem but threatens all countries; third, to overcome reticence and speak openly about AIDS and sexuality in order to help people to protect themselves and their loved ones from the sexual transmission of the virus; and finally, to commit governments to equity and justice in confronting the AIDS pandemic.

On Monday, 2 December 1991, the Pan American Health Organization hosted a program at its headquarters in Washington, D.C., that included an address by U.S. Surgeon General Antonia Novello and a panel discussion on the educational responsibility of television in carrying the AIDS prevention message to the public. The program opened with remarks by Dr. Carlyle Guerra de Macedo, PAHO's Director. He noted the human tendency to become complacent in the face of ongoing struggles with unpleasant realities, but warned against complacency at a time when, according to the WHO Global Program on AIDS, 5,000 more people worldwide become infected with HIV every day. The responsibility of maintaining diligence in fighting AIDS

must be shared between international, governmental, nongovernmental, community, and religious organizations throughout the hemisphere. Dr. Macedo highlighted the growing impact of AIDS on women and children, as well as the tragic situation of street youth, who are at risk for many health problems including AIDS. He pointed to the need to better educate health workers, particularly to allay fears and prejudices, and to protect those afflicted with AIDS from human rights abuses that arise from intolerance. He affirmed that the modern communications media have a critical role to play in health promotion and education, given the power of the media to change perceptions.

Surgeon General Novello spoke of the growing threat posed to women by AIDS. The rate of the spread of AIDS continues to increase among women and children. In the United States, 12% of AIDS victims are now women, but in other parts of the world the proportion of women affected is much greater—as high as 52% in Uganda. Despite these growing numbers, at present very little is known about the natural history of AIDS in women, including how it interacts with other diseases such as cervical cancer. Among current female AIDS cases in the United States, 34% acquired the disease through heterosexual contact, but trends suggest that the heterosexual route will dominate by the year 2000. Women must receive information that will allow them to protect themselves. A variety of problems, including economic and social situations, illiteracy, and societal attitudes, work against self-protection for many women; for example, suggesting that a partner use a condom may be culturally unacceptable. Education on means of preventing infection must be culturally sensitive as well as realistic. Women must also understand that by protecting their own health they are protecting their fam-

ilies. There is a need for counseling, research on AIDS cofactors in women, social support mechanisms, such as transportation services for AIDS patients, and, above all, the political empowerment of women. Dr. Novello emphasized the need for compassion towards all victims of AIDS, rather than judgmental views.

Dr. David Brandling-Bennett, Coordinator of PAHO's Health Situation and Trend Assessment Program, pointed out that only two drugs are currently licensed to treat the immune system destruction caused by HIV, and they are not usually affordable or available in developing countries. A vaccine is not expected for 10 years. Therefore, the world cannot afford to rely on or wait for technological innovations; the focus must be on providing knowledge and information. Six areas identified by PAHO as priorities in the fight against AIDS in the Americas are 1) strengthening national AIDS programs, 2) planning for the consequences of the epidemic, 3) researching educational approaches to modifying behavior, 4) conducting biomedical research, 5) countering discrimination, and 6) reversing complacency and denial.

The next speaker was Mr. Joseph Fernandez, Chancellor of New York City Public Schools. When he assumed that position on 2 January 1990, he ordered a program review of AIDS prevention activities, which found a failure to educate about AIDS despite a state mandate for such education at the high school level. Subsequently, the curriculum was rewritten, expanded, and enhanced. He also proposed a program in which condoms were to be made available at the schools to students, a proposal that proved highly controversial. Chancellor Fernandez emphasized that this was a condom *availability*, not *distribution*, plan. Abstinence is also discussed, and young people are made aware of the dangers of condom

failure. Parental consent is not required to receive condoms and the young person's anonymity is maintained. After volatile public hearings, the new curriculum and condom availability plans were approved in February 1991, and the first two schools began making condoms available on 26 November of last year. While this program will not solve the AIDS problem, Chancellor Fernandez believes that it drives home the message that AIDS kills and that in the long run it will save lives. However, there is still strong opposition, both at the local and national levels, to condoms being made available in schools, and court suits are pending.

Next in the program was a panel discussion on the educational responsibility of television to share the challenge of carrying the AIDS prevention message to the public. The panel members were Chancellor Fernandez; Dr. Karen Hein, Director of the Adolescent AIDS Program, Montefiore Medical Center, Bronx, New York; Dr. Mary Jane Rotheram-Borus, Director of the HIV Adolescent Studies Group, Columbia University, New York; Ms. Judith Stoia, Executive Producer ("The AIDS Quarterly," "In the Shadow of Love"), WGBH Television, Boston; and Dr. Ruth Westheimer, sex therapist and author. Mr. John Merrow of National Public Radio and the Learning Channel served as the moderator. The panelists agreed that while television had made strides in communicating straightforwardly about AIDS, it still had a "split personality" on the subject: dramas specifically about AIDS had been very in-

formative, but other television shows, even though they promoted sexuality, rarely dealt with issues such as AIDS, condom use, and contraception. Social responsibility often took a back seat to entertainment, and there was a tendency toward sensationalism in news stories. The panelists believed that television could be a powerful tool to educate people about AIDS in both its news and entertainment programming, and that the industry had the duty to respond to this challenge.

The next item on the program was a performance by the Sinai Teen Art Resources (S.T.A.R.) Theatre, a group of young people aged 13-24 who write and perform dramatic scenes depicting situations in which teens are confronted with the risk or reality of HIV infection and AIDS. The group is part of the AIDS prevention and treatment program at Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center in New York City and performs at schools and for other audiences in that area. After a performance, members of the audience are given the opportunity to discuss what they've seen with the actors, who remain in character while answering questions. S.T.A.R. Theatre is one of the nontraditional approaches of the Mount Sinai program to utilize youth as direct educators of other youth.

The observance of World AIDS Day at PAHO raised awareness of current needs as well as projects and programs that are addressing them. It also clearly focused attention on what more can be done, especially by the mass media.