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Activists dominate Montreal AIDS conference

While it is now commonplace to cite the decline of infection rates among gay men, there was skittishness in Montreal about what lessons could be learned from that

BY ED SCHIFFER

The organizers of the Fifth International AIDS Conference, held June 4-9 in Montreal, wanted this year's conference to be different. Subtitled "The Scientific and Social Challenge," it was to be the first meeting where potential medical breakthroughs were discussed side by side with issues like discrimination and the ethics of mandatory reporting. From the moment the conference opened, however, it was clear that it was not simply a matter of adding panels or sessions. When 300 activists seized the stage at the opening ceremonies, it was clear addressing "the social challenge" might mean calling into question business (and science) as usual.

And that was the real news coming out of Montreal last month. By the end of the conference, many scientists were openly grumbling that papers on virology and epidemiology had had to compete with presentations by the likes of Oakland's "Safe Sex Slut," prostitute activist Carol Leigh. Knowing that next year's conference in San Francisco is scheduled to coincide with Lesbian and Gay Pride Week, many called for a separation of scientific and social issues next June. But in doing so, they were missing the most important lesson of Montreal: that AIDS is a cultural phenomenon and that the search for a cure is conditioned by social factors. This is, of course, an old lesson for the gay community, but it was heartening to watch activists get the word out to scientists who seem determined to remain closeted in their labs.

This is not to deny that there were several interesting scientific developments announced in Montreal. Mainstream media latched onto the venerable figure of Dr. Jonas Salk announcing encouraging progress towards an AIDS vaccine in his experiments on chimpanzees and humans. It would be news, indeed, if the man who wiped out polio could now conquer AIDS, but the desire for such dramatic solutions can obscure how complicated the disease is that brought the 12,000 conferees together. Overlooked amid the hoopla were figures like Dr. Joseph Sonnabend who dared to suggest that the HIV virus might not be the real cause of the disease, as well as the many clinicians who stressed that it was more important to find treatments for specific opportunistic infections than to go after the virus directly.

Such differences of scientific opinion might remain the stuff of specialized journals were it not for the presence of AIDS activists. In addition to organizing several demonstrations around such issues as anonymous testing, activists at Montreal demonstrated an impressive grasp of scientific data and procedure. At a news conference, members of ACT-UP/New York released "A National AIDS Treatment Research Agenda" that not only continued their ongoing critique of federal drug testing policies, but also offered detailed and coordinated strategies for developing and delivering effective treatments. In so doing, they explicitly endorsed the community-based research which has been behind some of the most exciting recent treatment advances (e.g. aerosol pentamidine used as prophylaxis against *pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia).

The idea that local communities might do a better job of finding AIDS drugs than federal bureaucracies merely applies to

scientific research a truth the gay community has learned painfully over the past eight years. We do well not to rely on public officials. In the face of governmental neglect, the gay and lesbian community closed ranks to educate and literally save itself. And while it is now commonplace to cite the decline in infection rates among gay men, there was skittishness in Montreal about what lessons could be learned from that. At a time when the vast majority of PWAs outside Africa are still gay men, there was only one session devoted to "Gay Community Issues."

The papers presented at that panel, however, showed there was much to talk about. Ben Schatz of the National Gay Rights Advocates described the "de-gaying" of AIDS, the process by which the role of the gay community in the crisis has been systematically diminished. More overt homophobia was the subject of the Human Rights Campaign Fund's Eric Rosenthal, who discussed the role that the bigotry of Sen. Jesse Helms and others has played in thwarting the federal response to AIDS. Melinda Cuthbert, a Yale sociologist, analyzed the political conditions which allowed the gay community to organize and which may be preventing minority populations from doing likewise.

And if any of this was lost on the conference at large, there at the closing ceremonies was Randy Shilts, condescending to the activists about their occasionally misplaced anger, but clearly inviting the scientific community to witness "for the first time in the history of medicine," a "political coalition form around a health issue."

Shilts's message of political empowerment played differently to different audiences. The scientists had been put on notice that they would be held accountable for their actions. The Montreal newspaper wondered archly if the next step was the political organization of Alzheimer's and cancer patients and concluded that might not be a bad idea.

For many of us in Montreal, Shilts was only stating the obvious. Looking around the convention hall, political empowerment was apparent in the sheer number of gay journalists and activists who had been vigilant throughout the proceedings. It was apparent in all the video cameras they wielded to record their own version of the week's events. Shilts had said a health coalition based in the lesbian and gay community was one created by very politically sophisticated people, and the essence of that sophistication seemed to be an appreciation for the power of the media. I do not mean by this simply the scene-stealing demonstrations (which, incidentally, did force the conference organizers to address issues like the inclusion of PWAs on panels). Throughout the week I had seen a number of videos that various artists and "collectives" had made about AIDS. Many carried straightforward messages of prevention or mourning, but others showed a determination to view the AIDS crisis in different terms. In Toronto, video artist John Greyson's "The AIDS Epidemic," for instance, a mock music video genially attacks "Acquired Dread of Sex," while celebrating gay sexuality. In its determination to challenge the attempt of certain conservatives to make the AIDS crisis serve their own agendas, it sums up the spirit activists brought to the Montreal conference.



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