

New discoveries, old truths

*Activists help create positive link
with both scientific and medical community*

BY ED SCHIFFER

Although more than 12,000 people travelled to San Francisco for the Sixth International Conference on AIDS June 20-24, the tone of the gathering was set by the relative few who did not come. Faced with the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) refusal to change its policy excluding persons infected with HIV from entering the country, more than 100 groups boycotted the proceedings and provided those choosing to attend with a symbol of all that has been wrong with the institutional response to AIDS. The barriers raised by the INS, however, were only the most obvious barriers the international AIDS community was forced to acknowledge.

By far the most palpable barriers inside the conference were those continuing to separate the scientific and medical community from AIDS activists. Ever since the activists' repeated disruptions of last year's Montreal conference, there had been fears that protests this year could turn violent, especially as the conference coincided with the celebration of Lesbian and Gay Pride Week in the unofficial gay capital of the world.

Such fears proved to be unfounded. Although more than 300 members of ACT UP and their supporters were arrested in the course of daily demonstrations outside the convention hall, their numbers and their actions never vindicated the unprecedented security precautions taken by local police. Scores of police officers in riot gear became a fixture at the conference site.

In addition to the INS policy, the demonstrations, which generally attracted about 1000 participants, targeted limited access to the conference for persons living with HIV disease and the exclusion of women, children and people of color from research and treatment. While several speakers inside the conference lauded "the San Francisco Model" of treatment in community settings, local activists offered an alternative "Tour of the Ruins," highlighting insufficient state and city funding and the inherent limitations of a "model" so reliant on volunteers subject to burnout.

Inside the conference, the exchange of information proceeded with few interruptions. The scientific sessions reported several hopeful if limited developments, but the sessions devoted to issues of social policy indicated a more disturbing lack of progress. On a panel devoted to human rights, speakers from India and Mexico presented pessimistic readings of the situation in their respective countries, and Matt Coles of the Northern California ACLU offered an impressionistic survey of AIDS' complex impact on gay rights in the US. Speaking at the opening

ceremonies, Peter Staley of ACT UP/New York questioned the sincerity of the official US effort against AIDS when, instead of addressing the conference, President Bush chose to attend a North Carolina fundraiser for Senator Jesse Helms, the homophobic author of the INS HIV exclusion clause.

If the activists proved not to be a major disrupting force at this year's meetings, it may have been because conference organizers had made real progress toward including them in the proceedings. More importantly, there were signs that scientists and public health officials were coming to accept the activists as major "players" in the race to end the AIDS crisis. A session on "Community Organization and Activism" attracted an overflow crowd that listened as a variety of advocates for minorities, IV drug users and children with AIDS described the social barriers to translating science into public policy.

Despite such gestures toward inclusion, much of the important work on AIDS going on in San Francisco last month took place outside the international conference. In addition to the demonstrations, these extramural events included several "satellite" conferences where researchers and activists could meet on less contested "turf" to discuss alternative treatments and avenues of research that leading scientists continue to block.

Most impressive in this regard were a series of nighttime "community outreach sessions." Free and open to the public, these panels held out the hope that old adversaries like ACT UP and the FDA could cooperate in the future.

If it was surprising to hear Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases agree with ACT UP about the need for a radically new kind of drug trial, it was sobering to hear ACT UP acknowledge that, as the nature of epidemic changed, AIDS activism had to do more to reach beyond its original base in the gay and lesbian community. Dr. Mindy Fullilove of Columbia University's HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies reminded everyone that in approaching minority communities, we would have to learn to appreciate "the kind of expertise that exists outside the walls of the university."

Throughout the week there was a growing awareness that AIDS pointed to the need for national health care. While this was the point of several of the demonstrators' chants, Washington lobbyist Jean McGuire warned this is "not something we can be glib about." In justifying their decision to shout down Secretary of Health and Social Services Louis Sullivan during the closing ceremonies, ACT UP said it was time to turn words into action. That was the lesson for all in San Francisco.

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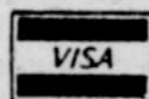


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