

# A LONG ROAD AHEAD:

Two reports from Geneva show there's still much to do in the battle against HIV and AIDS

## Reasons for Hope

by The AIDS Writers Group

Tens of thousands of attendees viewed thousands of presentations during the 12th World AIDS Conference, held June 27 through July 3 in Geneva.

Every two years the conference unites researchers and clinicians, activists, and AIDS service workers to search for solutions to the pandemic caused by the human immunodeficiency virus.

Presentations given at the 1996 gathering in Vancouver, British Columbia, suggested revolutionary changes were taking place in the fight against HIV. Reports at this year's conference, on the other hand, indicate that, despite those advances, there is still a long way to go before progress will be made against the virus on a worldwide scale.

There are more than 30 million people with HIV throughout the world. Despite the best efforts of public health and prevention agencies around the globe, new diagnoses continue to increase at a rate of 16,000 a day.

"Millions of people are becoming infected in the developing world every year—10 million since we last met two years ago," said Dr. Bernard Hirschel, the conference chairman.

Within the United States, an estimated 700,000 to 940,000 people are living with HIV, with 40,000 new cases reported each year. Thus far, the epidemic has left 400,000 dead in the United States and almost 12 million dead worldwide.

With 16,000 people contracting HIV every day, a safe, effective vaccine remains the Holy Grail of HIV research. Seemingly countless vaccine candidates now exist, with several of them in clinical trials. Unfortunately, no data reported in Geneva verified the safety or effectiveness of any of these vaccines. Some researchers, such as David Baltimore, who leads U.S. vaccine research, claim it may be as long as a decade before one of these candidates is proven to work.

Margaret Johnson, who is with the recently formed International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, is critical of the slow progress being made.

"The world is not on track to meet the goal of a safe and effective AIDS vaccine in the next decade," she said.

In an attempt to hasten the pace of vaccine development, IAVI announced a new plan of action to accelerate research. With funding from various sources—including the Levi Strauss Foundation and Microsoft founder Bill Gates—IAVI plans to create research teams to speed up testing of promising vaccines.

"This program will not only put us back on track, it will put us on the fast track," said Johnson.

The theme of the 11th World AIDS Conference in '96 was *One World, One Hope*. That concept highlighted a hope that new scientific breakthroughs in treating HIV would be shared throughout the world. The theme of this year's conference was *Closing the Gap*, which in essence acknowledged that the challenge of global sharing still exists.

An example of the gap can be found in the contrast between the relatively small number of HIV treatment "haves" in developed northern continents and the increasing population of treatment "have nots" in poorer Southern Hemisphere countries.

The estimated cost for a year-long course of triple antiviral therapy is around \$14,000.

"With our living standard in our country, who can afford that?" asked Ugandan AIDS

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## The Specter of AIDS

by Bob Roehr

The 12th World AIDS Conference was a sober reminder of the challenges that remain in combating HIV and AIDS.

In some villages of Botswana and Zimbabwe, for example, more than half of all pregnant women test positive for HIV. A recent study by the World Health Organization estimates 680,000 babies are born with HIV each year, and, in many nations of sub-Saharan Africa, a quarter to a third of all adults may be HIV-positive. The pattern of infection seems to

be at the start of the same upward curve in many nations of Asia.

The United Nations recently began a pilot program to treat 30,000 pregnant women with AZT during the last few weeks of pregnancy to reduce the likelihood of transmission of HIV to their babies.

It may be a noble effort but is not even a stop-gap in the context of Africa. ACT UP Paris called the program an "orphan factory."

Perhaps a quarter of newborns will carry the virus; perhaps another 10 percent will acquire it through breast-feeding. And the rapid course of the disease in Africa, where sustained therapy is simply not affordable, means infants who do not die of their own HIV will likely be orphaned at an early age. There are 8 million orphans to AIDS and the number will balloon still further.

Whole villages have become ghost towns as

the working-age population dies and leaves children and grandparents who try to cope, said Angelo D'Agostino, who runs an orphanage in Kenya.

Average life expectancy in Africa, which rose from 40 years in 1950 to 63 in 1990, has fallen across the continent this decade, according to the World Bank. The worst example is Zimbabwe, where average life expectancy has plummeted by 20 years, erasing all of the gains of the postwar decades.

On the domestic scene, the miracle of protease inhibitors has led some gay men to let down their guard when it comes to safer sex. They think—according to conventional wisdom at the Geneva conference—"Infection isn't so bad now that we have drugs that can control the virus."

Researchers now have proof that people are being newly infected with HIV that is resistant to protease inhibitors. One of the 35 people studied in San Francisco's post-exposure program was infected with a virus that has four mutations that resist the effects of reverse transcriptase inhibitors and seven mutations that reduce its susceptibility to protease inhibitors.

That man, said Dr. Frederick Hecht, who is helping run the program at San Francisco General Hospital, appears to have acquired the virus through a single act of unprotected receptive anal intercourse during which his partner withdrew before ejaculation. Six months of triple-combination therapy, begun just days after exposure, failed to completely suppress the virus.

Meanwhile, Dr. Sabine Yerly of the University Hospital in Geneva, recounted how another gay man who was infected through unprotected anal intercourse is now resistant to four protease inhibitors.

In both examples, the sexual partner had been on multiple therapies over the years, often with poor compliance to the regimen.

"It's like you were time-warped back to 1983, where there were no drugs at all," said Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute for Allergies and Infectious Diseases.

The hope for a preventative vaccine, mean-

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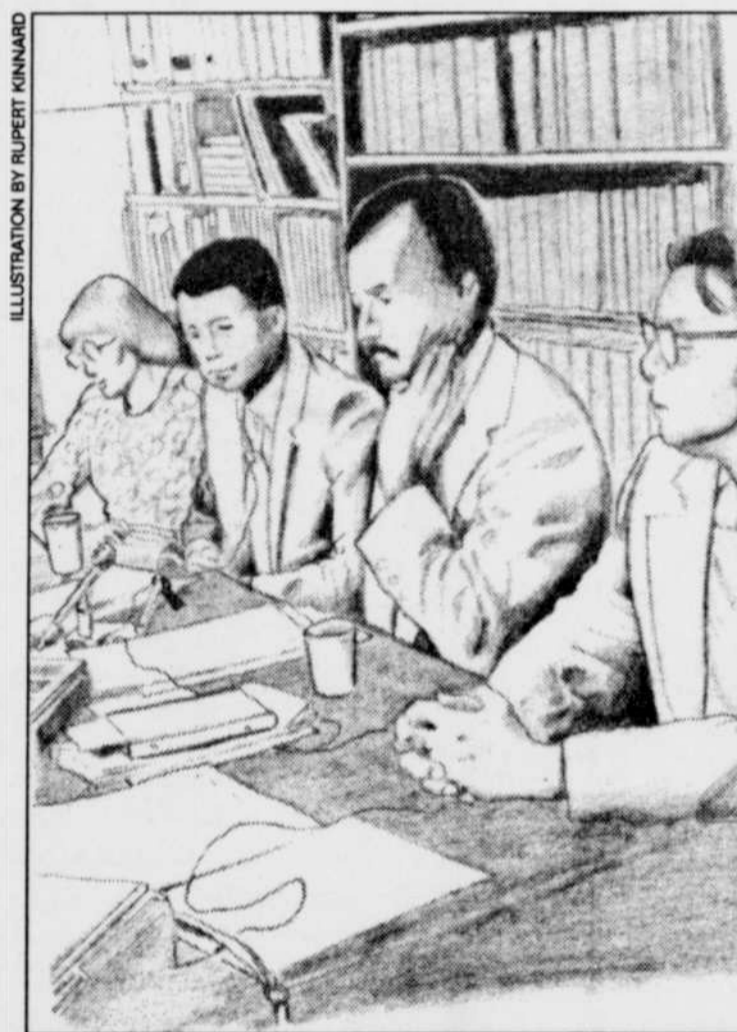



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