

The big story at the 14th International AIDS Conference held July 7 to 12 in Barcelona, Spain, was not a surprise. It is that less than 2 percent of the 40 million HIV-positive people in the world have access to the drugs that keep them from dying of AIDS.

Bill Clinton made several appearances during the confab, presenting his recipe for ending the AIDS epidemic. The former U.S. president serves as advisory board chairman of the International AIDS Trust.

"My advice," Clinton told the 15,000 delegates, "is push every country you can to make their deals with the drug companies. If the deals are unsatisfactory, go to Brazil or India—the U.N. is certifying those drugs. Then come to the rest of us and say, 'OK, this is what we need: Here's what we need for medicine, and here's what we need for prevention.'"

Brazil and India circumvent company patents by producing and exporting generic AIDS drugs at a fraction of the cost of the brand-name products. "Barring some nuclear war, more people are going to die from AIDS in the next three years than from anything else," Clinton said.

About 20 million people around the world have died of AIDS to date, according to the United Nations. By 2020, 68 million more may be dead. Even with negotiated price reductions in some Third World nations, the anti-retroviral drugs—each one patented and produced by only one company—still cost way too much.

"We are only at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic," UNAIDS director Peter Piot said. "Collectively, we have grossly, grossly underestimated how bad this was going to be.... It is by far the biggest epidemic that humanity has known in absolute terms."

### PROTESTS

Hundreds of protesters staged a colorful march outside the conference demanding universal access to cheap, generic AIDS drugs, including in wealthy nations, where the yearly price tag for an antiviral cocktail is \$12,000 to \$15,000, a serious strain on health care budgets.

On day three of the conference, about 100 noisy protesters—with support from much of the audience—prevented U.S. Health Secretary Tommy Thompson from being heard when he delivered his address. They chanted, blew whistles and shouted—a scene reminiscent of the 1990 AIDS conference in San Francisco. Thompson persevered to the end despite the deafening din.

The protesters accused President Bush's administration of failing to give its fair share to

## EPIDEMIC PROPORTIONS

Barcelona conference: AIDS is out of control by Rex Wockner



Bill Clinton tapes an MTV special during the 14th International AIDS Conference on July 11 in Barcelona, Spain

the new Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; shortchanging the U.S. AIDS Drug Assistance Program; blocking needle-exchange programs; and "attacking science-based prevention programs that talk frankly about sex and supporting abstinence-only prevention programs." Protester Asia Russell said, "The truth is, we know what he was going to say, and we're tired of his lies."

U.N. officials and others working on the Global Fund agreed with the protesters on all points. Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs, an adviser to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, said the Bush administration suffers from "utter confusion" on AIDS issues, lacking even a plan.

The United States has pledged \$500 million to the Global Fund, but officials say the nation's fair share would be \$2.5 billion of the total \$10 billion yearly goal. Thompson said the U.S. contribution is a quarter of all the money the fund has raised so far. Officials replied that when the United States didn't ante up its fair share, other nations followed suit and didn't pay what they should, either.

Protesters pointed out that as a percentage of their gross domestic products, Sweden has contributed seven times more and Rwanda has contributed 10 times more than the United States. Just hours after the conference ended July 12, the Senate passed a measure to increase U.S.

contributions to the Global Fund; the bill now must be reconciled with one the House approved.

Spanish Health Minister Celia Villalobos got a reception similar to Thompson's when she tried to address the opening plenary session. No one heard her because several hundred delegates screamed and blew whistles throughout her speech.

They were upset that up to 100 delegates were denied visas to attend the conference by Spanish embassies and consulates in several nations, including South Africa, Sri Lanka and Yugoslavia. They also said Spain has budgeted only for 21 percent of its promised contribution to the Global Fund.

### HIV TRANSMISSION

A new study revealed that many young U.S. gay men are barebacking and that most who have become HIV-positive as a result do not know they are infected. The research was conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at gay bars and other meeting places in several cities. They interviewed 5,719 men younger than 30, then drew their blood.

A total of 573 of the men tested positive, and 440 of them didn't know they were positive. Most, in fact, thought they were negative and at

low risk for HIV infection. About 91 percent of the blacks, 70 percent of the Latinos and 60 percent of the whites who were positive didn't know it.

A spokesman for the Washington, D.C.-based national lobby group AIDS Action said a big part of the problem is barebacking—gay men deliberately not using condoms during casual sexual encounters.

"There is the whole notion that AIDS is over in the United States, that it's not a problem anymore," said Scott Brawley, public policy director. "Prevention messages are not working.... We have a whole generation of people under the age of 30 that don't remember the AIDS epidemic, that think it's nothing more than, 'Hell, you take a couple of pills and you'll be fine.'"

Brawley had no suggestions on how to slow the barebacking trend. "My honest response, as a gay man, is that things are going to have to get worse again before they'll ever get better," he said.

### TREATMENT

A new class of drug will hit the market within a year. Fusion inhibitors, also called entry inhibitors, block HIV earlier in the replication process than any of the 16 drugs now available, preventing an immune system cell from becoming infected in the first place.

The new drug—made by Roche and the U.S. biotech firm Trimeris—is called T-20 or enfuvirtide. It has succeeded in reducing HIV viral load to undetectable levels in many people who had become resistant to all currently available drugs, which are protease inhibitors or reverse-transcriptase inhibitors.

T-20 will be shockingly expensive—\$10,000 to \$12,000 a year, according to reports—and must be injected rather than swallowed. Still, veteran AIDS researcher Robert Gallo, who co-discovered HIV, predicted fusion/entry inhibitors soon will replace "toxic" protease inhibitors.

"The inhibitors of viral entry will be the most important new advances," he said. "My guess would be in two or three years, the protease inhibitors will go away. They will be taken over by viral entry inhibitors and by more intelligent use of reverse-transcriptase inhibitors."

Human trials will begin this year in the United States and Italy on another possible new treatment—therapeutic vaccines. The vaccines, which are rubbed into the skin, might allow HIV-positive people to go off their meds periodically or to take fewer drugs, researchers said. The vaccines work in monkeys, stimulating the white blood cells that destroy HIV-infected cells. □

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