

Renewed effort needed to protect HIV gains

By Ashlee Betteridge
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An event at the National Press Club in Canberra today (Friday) ahead of the Melbourne [AIDS 2014](#) conference highlighted that while much progress has been made on the fight against HIV and AIDS, complacency could lead to these gains quickly coming undone.

The event was tinged by tragedy following the [news](#) that up to 100 passengers on the crashed Malaysia Airlines flight were leading HIV researchers, World Health Organisation staff and other delegates on their way to next week's conference.

A visibly upset Professor Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, President of the International AIDS Society, said that this was a terrible loss; however the best tribute would be to continue to show that the AIDS community is mobilised to build a better future for all.

Awarded a Nobel Prize for the discovery of HIV, Professor Barré-Sinoussi spoke of the huge gains that have been made in reducing infections in recent decades, particularly among vulnerable groups such as men who have sex with men and injecting drug users. But she emphasised the need for a rapid scale-up of universal access to antiretroviral treatment.

Professor Barré-Sinoussi identified implementation of solutions as a key priority, and highlighted the ongoing challenge to address affordability of treatment for resource-limited countries with underdeveloped health systems and shortages of health workers.

Emphasising that "HIV is not just a battle against a virus, but also a battle against intolerance", she said that the passing of repressive laws in some countries that impact on marginalised groups left her "shocked and angry".

Lord Norman Fowler, a former UK cabinet minister under the Thatcher government who implemented public awareness campaigns on AIDS in the 1980s and has authored a book on the subject, spoke of his disappointment that the world had largely "turned its back" on such campaigns to increase awareness and knowledge of HIV.

Lord Fowler emphasised that AIDS was "not yesterday's problem" and said there had been "too little effort by many governments" on the issue. He highlighted the negative impact of laws criminalising homosexuality in countries such as Russia and Uganda and spoke on the importance of having open and free health systems.

Professor Sharon Lewin, the local co-chair for AIDS 2014 and one of Australia's leading infectious disease researchers, discussed Australia's historical leadership on research and policy.

Professor Lewin said that while there were promising developments, the path to a cure would be a long one and expectations needed to be measured. While more support for finding a cure was needed, she said that "any funding for HIV cure research must not displace funding for treatment."

During the discussion, Lord Fowler called on governments to put their support behind the Global Fund, and warned that without the support of overseas aid "we will start to go backwards if not careful". Professor Barré-Sinoussi questioned why some wealthy countries weren't making contributions to the Fund.

On a question about Papua New Guinea, Professor Lewin said that Australia had a responsibility to our region through its aid program and support for PNG's efforts on HIV/AIDS should be continued.

In their closing remarks, all three speakers warned against complacency and the importance of continuing advocacy to ensure that governments around the world take responsibility on the issue.

If governments don't step up now, "they will have given a lot of money in the past for nothing", said Professor Barré-Sinoussi.

About the author/s

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Ashlee Betteridge was the Manager of the Development Policy Centre until April 2021. She was previously a Research Officer at the centre from 2013-2017. A former journalist, she holds a Master of Public Policy (Development Policy) from ANU and has development experience in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. She now works as a development consultant.

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