

Opening Press Conference – Sunday August 13th, 2006

Prior to the opening ceremonies of the XVI International AIDS Conference, seven important spokespeople gathered at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre to make remarks to hordes of buzzing journalists, privy to the opening press conference in the media centre. At the dais sat Mark Wainberg, Helene Gayle, Bill and Melinda Gates, Tony Clement, Peter Piot, and Frika Chia Iskandar, the only youth representative and person living with AIDS.

The theme of the Toronto Conference is “time to deliver,” a message of urgency and need for action, considering that it has now been twenty-five years since the discovery of HIV/AIDS. “Stigmas need to be driven out of human consciousness,” stressed Wainberg, whose social conscience prevails in all his work. Iskandar, who is nearly the age of the AIDS pandemic, took up the torch of access as a right and not a privilege, but threw in, “access is not just about pills,” seeing as vital services such as transportation are unavailable to many infected in rural communities.

Seeing as AIDS is truly indiscriminate, Melinda Gates enforced that money and efforts must not be withheld from any group, saying, “we can’t turn our backs on anyone in this disease.” In direct contrast to this idealism, Iskandar proposed that while continuing to tackle eradicating stigma, which is a major battle, it is necessary that “we learn how to live with stigma and discrimination.”

Dr. Piot highlighted the “need to make money work”, citing the example that in Latin America, there is a high prevalence of the disease among gay men; however, very little if any money is going toward that group. In light of the Gates’ recent \$500 million donation to the Global Fund, it will be incredibly important to ensure that money does not get tied up in bureaucracy, but that it is directed to where it can truly make a difference.

This is not to say that no money is reaching the ground, since Dr. Piot revealed, “eighty percent of people who need it have access to treatment in Botswana,” a positive return on investment. Unfortunately, Canadian Health Minister Tony Clement could not offer news of such accomplishments, as Canada has failed to make good on promises to send pills overseas. ” In a moment of incoherence reminiscent of Chretien’s ‘a proof is a proof’ speech, Clement mumbled that “the facts are the facts and the facts are that not one pill has flowed.” He ultimately said that Canada stands alongside four other countries that have also failed to live up to their promises, placing it “in good company. Or, I should say bad company, I guess.”

With any luck, the excitement and enthusiasm of the conference organizers and participants will be able to motivate countries such as Canada into action regarding their domestic and foreign policy on AIDS. Political leaders will be critical allies in the coming years, as the world bands together in an effort to form a sustainable long-term response to the HIV/AIDS crisis.