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SEX, CONDOMS AND HIV PREVENTION

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What are your expectations of the Bangkok AIDS Conference?

I hope that the Conference will establish very clearly that leaders of all countries must be intimately involved with the issues and solutions of the HIV / AIDS pandemic. It cannot be regarded as a health problem alone but must be seen as a societal problem, a development problem and a human rights issue in which all arms of government, business, civil society and community must be involved.

What is your message to the world leaders?

My message is very simple. This is the last train. Political leaders from national level down to community level must assume responsibility in directing the fight against AIDS and no longer see it as a job of health or welfare agencies. There must be firm political and financial commitment by governments, and I hope that more enlightened leaders, prime ministers and presidents will see fit to chair their national AIDS endeavours.

It would be wonderful if the present state of affairs, where the talk is big and the money is small, could be reversed.

Should people be afraid of condoms?

For most human beings on earth, condoms are the best means of preventing the spread of HIV / AIDS. It is time to forget embarrassment caused by condoms. It is the only life saver we have, and the condom is a wonderful and friendly product. In fact, today, it is a girl's best friend. If one is embarrassed by the condom, one should be more embarrassed by the tennis ball, which has more rubber in it. Maybe at Wimbledon they should give out condoms while watching tennis matches. I would hope that more people would get involved in condom manufacturing and promotion.

Where and at what stage do you think young people should receive sex education--and why?

I started my children in kindergarten. They used to go to school with condoms to show their friends. Education is not just provided in schools and by books and teachers. People are learning and being educated by their natural surroundings. Children watch chicken and pigs, buffalos and cows and even monkeys having sex. They start learning about sex well before they are taught about it at school. So perhaps children should learn about animals and themselves and the issue of sex at the primary school level. If it were not for sex none of us would be on earth today. Let us appreciate sex, understand it and let kids have a chance of obtaining a healthier understanding of sex. If we teach kids about guns we should also teach them about sex because unprotected sex kills more people than guns. The millions of people who will die of AIDS due to unprotected sex will be higher than the number of soldiers killed by bullets and bombs during the Second World War.

Thailand has been highly successful in curbing HIV infection. What were the main ingredients of that achievement?

Thailand entered the early period of HIV / AIDS in denial like most Asian countries. Then along came a smart, educated and honest Prime Minister who agreed to tackle HIV/AIDS head-on. He showed clear political and financial commitment and initiated an era of enlightenment with regard to AIDS. The Prime Minister himself, Mr. Anand Panyarachun, became Chairman of the National AIDS Committee. Sufficient budget was allocated to all government departments that contribute to the fight against AIDS, and businesses were asked to educate their staff and customers. Education on HIV / AIDS was introduced in all schools, from primary level upwards, and it was also provided through religious institutions. The whole society was involved, including the movie industry and mass media. Government owned radio and TV stations, in particular, were required to broadcast half a minute of AIDS education during every hour of broadcast time. So for several years everyone in Thailand got the message. Through the years since 1991 we have seen a very significant decline in HIV infections, and the rate of new infections today in 2004 is one eleventh of what it used to be in the year 1991. The key ingredients were strong political and financial commitment and an integrated approach where every sector of society and every ministry was involved, right down to the grass-root level.

How is Thailand balancing prevention and treatment? Are these priorities competing or mutually reinforcing?

There is an inherent imbalance between the two worldwide, and Thailand is no exception. In my opinion, there is a genuine need to crank up public education, for which government, business and society have to do more.

Condoms have to be made more available. They must not only be a girl's best friend but society's best friend, society's life saver. I would like to see a formula where 20 per- cent of the AIDS budget is used for public education and 80 percent for treatment and care. However, this ratio has not been achieved in any country. The more public education and prevention we can provide, the more successful treatment programmes will be. Public education means more than just knowledge on how to prevent AIDS. It also means understanding and the reduction of stigmatization.

What has been the biggest disappointment to you in your fight against HIV / AIDS?

There have been significant changes and advances made in the fight against AIDS. However, with it came disappointments and lost opportunities. Insufficient funds have been made available for public education and for civil society. We have almost ignored the key roles that the business sector and religious institutions play, and we have overlooked the need to provide income-generating activities for HIV -positive people through microcredit loans. Most disappointing of all are those people in many countries who claim to be leaders of government and society but show no interest in the issue or merely pay lip service to it.

What are the three things Thailand can and should do about AIDS today?

From the early days of denial to the magnificent 'age of enlightenment' when we were able to bring down new infections so much, Thailand has slipped into a state of suspended animation with regard to public AIDS education. First, stronger awareness and prevention must be introduced, and government, business, religious, educational and civil society sectors must play a more determined role.

Second, income-generating activities should be provided as well as microcredit loans to HIV-positive people (which has already been started by an NGO in Thailand). HIV-positive people can team up with HIV-negative friends in joint business ventures in which the HIV-negative partner's role is also to provide greater understanding and to reduce discrimination.

Third, since AIDS has no national boundaries, cross-border initiatives to combat AIDS should be intensified, and Thai health facilities should provide more care for our neighbours, namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and even Malaysia. Many other countries can do the same, be it in Asia, Africa or America. These activities must include special emphasis and support for women generally as well as drug users and commercial sex workers.

