

YEAH Now!



Organising Committee

By Sean McLennan

When the UN lowered their estimates of the number of people infected with HIV from forty million to thirty-three million, some media reaction seemed resentful, as though the UN had deliberately tried to dupe the world into thinking HIV/AIDS was a bigger problem than it was. They seemed to say, “Well, if we knew it was only thirty-three million we wouldn’t have wasted all that effort and money!” In fact, it’s good news for a change—although it should bring little comfort. We have not significantly altered the rate at which the virus spreads and like the populations it infects. The prevalence of HIV grows exponentially. Our overestimation doesn’t buy much time. Not to mention that thirty-three million is still a staggeringly large number—it’s the population of Canada!

Worldwide, the majority of HIV-infected individuals are between fifteen and thirty years of age, meaning that it is the world’s youth that are most at risk. That’s just one fact that makes HIV different than the other big killers like cancer or heart disease, which impact much older people. If it’s true that “youth are our tomorrow”, we’ve got some challenges coming up.

Many youth have seen their own futures and aren’t satisfied with what it has to offer; it’s heartening to see that they are mobilizing themselves to face the challenge of HIV: grass roots youth-organized, youth-targeted action groups are popping up all over. In the spring of 2006, in anticipation of AIDS 2006, the international HIV/AIDS conference held in Toronto in August, the United Nations Association of Canada sponsored a number of youth forums across Canada. At least one of those forums—the one held in Calgary—inspired a number of young people to carry on the torch. “Youth Everywhere Against HIV Now!”—YEAH Now!—was formed as the Youth Working Group of the Calgary Coalition against HIV/AIDS. Part of their mandate is to make the Youth Forum on HIV/AIDS a regular event; to that end, the second Calgary Youth Forum on HIV/AIDS was held on November 30 and December 1 last year, coinciding with World AIDS Day.

YEAH Now! took a novel approach to this forum; they focused on trying to reach youth indirectly, through members of their own community. The intent was to empower individuals through information and creative skills to speak to their own peers, through their own media, about HIV/AIDS. If we’ve learned one thing from modern advertising it’s that a message needs to be tailored to the audience; who better to create and deliver that message than passionate individuals who have intimate first-hand knowledge through membership in their own target group?

YEAH Now! has identified five primary target groups of youth: High School Youth, Post Secondary Youth, Aboriginal Youth, Immigrant Youth, and Street Youth. They believe that these populations relate to the HIV pandemic differently. Therefore, there are differences in how the issue should be addressed within these communities and need to be considered in order for any awareness or action campaign to be successful. Participants were encouraged to keep within the mindset of their target groups throughout the weekend and to think critically about how to they might respond to various media and messages.

The bulk of the forum was comprised of two sets of workshops. The first round was informational, discussing the relationship between HIV and various social factors: HIV and gender, HIV in the developing world and HIV on the street. The second round involved hands-on and creative work, passing on specific skills in a variety of media: stencil making, ‘zine publishing, letter writing, and parfleche (an aboriginal art using animal skins). By the end of Saturday, World AIDS Day, the participants had completed an impressive collection of action pieces crying a call to arms against HIV/AIDS.

The forum culminated in brainstorming of specific actions that could be taken to reach out to youth in the Calgary community. This points to YEAH Now!’s

primary mandate, which is to support youth in the community in taking their own actions; whether they be publications or events, one-time or ongoing. Events like the Youth Forum on HIV/AIDS are most likely preaching to the choir—real change happens when the “converted” interact with their peers in the overlapping spheres of social structure that determine culture, belief and practices.

Another unique characteristic of the HIV pandemic becomes apparent when examining the phenomenon these youth-organized actions represent—that is, the unusual impact that culture, belief and behaviour have on the spread of the disease. Youth might come together to raise awareness for a cause like breast cancer or autism in order to raise money, but they are not generally out to solve the problem itself. Fundamentally, HIV is not easily spread—it does not live outside the body for very long and even when exposed, the odds that an infection will occur are relatively small. The odds of contracting the virus can be made practically negligible with some trivial tools and changes in behaviour. HIV—arguably one of the worst epidemics to face humanity—could be halted in its tracks purely by collective will. How many diseases is it possible to say that about? HIV is possibly the first contagion that exploits culture to spread; it is only by virtue of the stigma that we place on HIV’s primary avenues of transmission—sex, and drug use—and our unwillingness to openly discuss them that HIV is allowed to perpetuate.

Which brings us back to the extraordinary impact organizations like YEAH Now! and the Youth Forum on HIV/AIDS can have. Only a relative handful of experts with years of experience and sophisticated knowledge can make significant progress in preventing cancer; but in a complete reversal of circumstance, a comparatively minuscule amount of knowledge in the minds of billions would be all the progress we need to stop HIV. That is, as long as that knowledge translates to action; combating culture is where the real struggle is. And here again, our hope lies with youth and groups like YEAH Now!—as they grow into middle age and have children of their own, hopefully their attitudes will drive the evolution of cultures immune to HIV.

Combating HIV is easy and something in which we all should actively take part. It doesn’t have to require a lot of money, time, or effort. Minimally:

1. Protect yourself. Use condoms. Don’t share needles. Get tested and ask for help when you need it.

If you’re comfortable that you’ve fulfilled step 1, maybe consider taking another:

2. Educate yourself. Make sure you have your facts straight and challenge how you feel about people infected with HIV. Do a web search and get an idea of what information is out there.

3. Talk positively about sex, drugs, and HIV with your family and friends; challenge the stigmas and misinformation that you encounter.

4. Contribute (time or money) to your local HIV/AIDS service organizations.

5. Contribute (time or money) to a national or international organization fighting HIV/AIDS globally.

6. Write a letter to your [political] representative.

Or maybe take a creative action of your own design. You have the power.

For more information about YEAH Now! visit yeahnow.org. ▼

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