

Youth - It's Time To Act



By Sean McLennan

Even though we all know that HIV and AIDS is a disease that can be contracted by anyone, the virus' mode of transmission make men who have sex with men (MSM) a particularly high risk demographic. If you look at the history of the infection, MSM do comprise the majority of infections, which makes it difficult to combat the perception that HIV/AIDS is a "gay disease". But if you look at recent trends that is no longer true; in Canada in 2003, straight males and females accounted for about as many new infections as MSM.

In fact, today, it is probably more accurate to characterize HIV/AIDS as a "youth disease". According to UN statistics, about half of the new infections in the world are in young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. In Canada, youth fifteen to twenty-nine account for just over twenty-seven percent of positive tests between 1985 and 2004—the fact that people can live for years before acquiring symptoms or getting tested suggests that even a higher percentage of HIV-infected individuals contracted the disease before age thirty. These facts have lead the United Nations Association in Canada to initiate "It's Time to Act: Mobilizing Young Canadians around HIV/AIDS", a peer education project aiming to "educate and empower youth between the ages of twenty to twenty-nine around HIV/AIDS and social determinants of health".

The two year project began last July and is divided into two primary phases with four stated goals:

1. SAFER SPACES—Creation of supportive and safer spaces where we can receive and exchange information on HIV/AIDS, and explore values, misconceptions and issues related to the prevention and management of HIV/AIDS.
2. POLICY AND ACTION PLANNING—Develop, publish and disseminate goals and recommendations on the Canadian response to HIV/AIDS.
3. EMPOWERMENT AND ACTION—Increase our personal and collective capacities to identify needs within our own communities and commit to participate in effective responses.
4. GLOBAL COMMITMENT—Increase our understanding of the global HIV/AIDS crisis and commit to participate in efforts to address the crisis.

The first year is focused primarily on action—getting out into youth communities to disseminate information about HIV and to gather information from young people to understand how they think about and relate to the issue. This will be done through a number of activities, including "twinning" partnerships with youth in other countries where the HIV crisis is more apparent; a national youth survey; regional Canadian youth forums—all culminating in participation in the XVI International Conference on AIDS in Toronto in August of this year.

Once that phase is complete, the intent is to collate the information gathered and use it as the basis for a number of documents including a youth declaration on HIV/AIDS, directed at governments and other organizations. Hopefully, the information can also be used in other ways, such as better targeting educational materials and programs.

A guiding principle of "It's Time to Act" is that education is more powerful when it comes from peers. To that end, UNAC has assembled a ten person National Youth Team with each member assigned to different Canadian region. One of the biggest responsibilities of each of the National Youth Teams is to organize and execute a youth forum in their region—by this summer forums will

have occurred in Vancouver, Calgary, Saskatoon, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec City, Halifax, St. John's and Iqaluit. We spoke to Sophie Wertheimer, who is responsible for organizing Calgary's youth forum, which will take place April 7th and 8th.

Sophie has put together an innovative program that draws together a diversity of people, perspectives and approaches to address AIDS awareness in a more engaging and meaningful way. There will, of course, be some basics about HIV prevention, but also workshops led by individuals whose lives have been touched by HIV in different ways: for example Sanelisiwe Dube, a student from Zimbabwe, and Whiley Eagle from the "Tipi of Courage" project at the Red Cross. There will be a presentation of the documentary "A Closer Walk" and an art workshop facilitated by Wednesday Lupyciw, a BFA student at ACAD—and perhaps most importantly, an action-planning session to teach and innovate practical ways of making a difference locally and globally. In this respect, UNAC and the National Team Members hope that the youth forums will reach out beyond the participants of the forums. Sophie expects that between fifty and sixty young people will participate in the Calgary forum.

Sophie Wertheimer herself is originally from Montreal and is currently working on her PhD related to HIV/AIDS through the Faculty of Communication and Culture at the University of Calgary. She became drawn to the issue during her undergraduate degree at Concordia University, which has quite an extensive program in HIV/AIDS related issues. Through her interest, she volunteered in several capacities and started asking questions about portrayals and perceptions of sexuality in our culture and media.

Sophie says that the response from the Calgary community has been tremendous and surprising, given the conservative reputation Alberta has (especially after the last election!). Even the rejections she's received are sincere in their regret and come with wishes that the program be successful, she reports.

It is estimated that there are about 56,000 HIV-infected individuals living in Canada today (approximately thirty percent of which don't know they are infected). This is about a twentieth of, say, the number of people living with diabetes, which HIV is often compared to these days with respect to it being a "chronic", not "terminal" disease. Certainly, it is not as serious a problem in Canada as it is in other parts of the world. Legitimately one might ask why Canadians need to worry so much about HIV.

There are many answers to this question, not the least of which is that Canadians cannot live in isolation from the rest of the world, and HIV/AIDS is probably the most serious health crisis the global community has ever faced. But perhaps more to the point with respect to HIV/AIDS being a "youth disease", HIV infection, unlike diabetes or cancer, is practically 100 per cent preventable through education. The avenues of transmission are not mysterious; they are well known and we have the power to stop it in its tracks right now, today. We don't need to wait for some medical breakthrough at some unspecified point in the future—we just need to transmit knowledge more efficiently than the virus.

If you are a young person, twenty to twenty-nine years old, and are interested in participating in Calgary's youth forum, or if you are interested in contributing in any capacity to "It's Time to Act", please get in contact with Sophie Wertheimer at youthforumcalgary@yahoo.ca. If you would like more information about the National Program, you can visit their website: <http://www.aidsactionsida.org> ▼

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