

Sex, Drugs and HIV



By Sean McLennan

I had an epiphany while attending the United Nations Association of Canada's "It's Time to Act" Youth Forum on HIV/AIDS on April 7 and 8 this year. I knew that the way HIV evolved to specifically target the immune system that would otherwise be responsible for eradicating it from the body was biologically brilliant—it's like gophers evolving to feed on cats and hawks as a defense mechanism. But there's another brilliant biological adaptation that is key to its success: it exploits our own culture against us.

Oh, I'm not suggesting deliberation or intelligence behind that adaptation—but the truth is, HIV is not that easy to transmit, nor is it that difficult to prevent. The only reason that it has become the most serious health threat not of our civilization—but also our species has ever encountered—is that we let it. We LET it. Because HIV stumbled on a transmission method involving the two social taboos we just can't dispassionately talk about—sex and drugs. Worldwide, the moral baggage surrounding these two topics makes us reluctant to think about HIV and to stigmatize those who are infected. In the vacuum created, HIV flourishes in our denial.

I can't help continuing to think in evolutionary terms—cultural change can be thought of as a sort of *fast* evolution—and changing the way we think and respond is probably our best chance of success. HIV reproduces and mutates much faster than we do—it adapts to the drugs that we throw at it (which are toxic, killing our people too—just more slowly). The communities that are willing to change how they think are the ones that are going to survive. What other infection can we say that about? It's ironic that our most serious infectious threat is the one that we have the most individual power to combat. The progression of HIV could be stopped with a social act of will. What other life-threatening illnesses could we say that about?

In Canada it's hard to think of HIV and AIDS as the "most serious health threat that our species has encountered" and it's true that in the Canadian population the rates of heart disease or cancer kill far more people. However, in the rest of the world, rates of infection are exploding. Human beings are not cognitively designed to be able to process large numbers—the difference between seven and eight, yeah we can handle that, OK, but the difference between seven-digit numbers and eight-digit numbers...it's more than we can get our heads around. So I won't use the mind-numbing stats. I'll keep it within the ranges that we can easily grasp. Imagine your extended family of ten people. Four of them have HIV and will die in the next few years. Probably a couple more will contract the virus within that time. Imagine your office at work—maybe thirty people—but ten of them have HIV.

In some respects, the virus itself is not as much a problem as the repercussions. The majority of new infections are in people under the age of thirty—that means young parents and people in their most productive period of life. The staggering number of children orphaned by AIDS will rise to [the equivalent of] more than half the population of Canada by 2010. The demographic group required to feed, clothe and educate those orphans is exactly the group hardest hit by AIDS and requiring care themselves. In some places in Africa, the average life expectancy is expected to drop below thirty-five years old. Try to imagine a functioning community, culture or economy where eighteen is middle-aged. Or where one to two out of every four people are not capable of taking care of themselves. It's impossible—we are witnessing a collapse of unprecedented proportions.

Unfortunately, still one of the most common beliefs both here and in the stricken populations themselves is that people who get HIV deserve it and that moral, productive, upstanding citizens won't be affected. Some even go so far as to suggest that AIDS a good thing—that it's ridding us of the undesirable segments of society. That's HIV exploiting our culture against us again; first appearing and continuing to be most successful amongst marginalized populations of men who have sex with men, drug users, and the poor have allowed HIV to remain highly stigmatized, which is arguably the single largest

barrier to combating the transmission of the virus.

HIV/AIDS is a complex issue both locally and globally; however, that complexity allows us more access points to make a difference. Changing attitudes and behaviours is a difficult task for sure, but it can be done. It is true that we have more individual power to combat HIV/AIDS than any other serious illness. The Tipi of Courage—a program supported by the Red Cross that focused on combating HIV/AIDS in aboriginal communities throughout western Canada—has a good working model: start with the individual. By building stronger individuals, we create stronger families. By building stronger families, we will build stronger communities; you can't start backwards and expect that the communities are going to build stronger individuals.

You don't have to get on a plane and fly to Africa to fight HIV/AIDS, nor do you have to give away your life savings. In rough order of importance, here are some concrete actions you can easily do to contribute; decide what level is appropriate for you and commit yourself to it. Consider moving on to another action later on.

- 1 Protect yourself. Get tested. Always use condoms. Never share needles. Take care of your health, and if you need help, ask for it.
- 2 Educate yourself. Make sure you have your facts straight about HIV transmission, and challenge how you feel about people infected with HIV. Try not to *turn-off* when you see the stats on the news or in the papers. Do a couple of web searches and get an idea of the breadth of information available.
- 3 Talk positively about sex, drugs and HIV with your family and friends, even if just in casual conversation. Challenge stigmas and information that you encounter. It might be awkward at times, but not as awkward as living with HIV.
- 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 representative.

Even if all you are in a position to do is to protect yourself, that's a significant accomplishment—if everyone did those simple things, we'd nearly achieve our goal.

It's Time to Act: Mobilizing Young Canadians Around HIV/AIDS is a project of the United Nations Association of Canada that includes ten regional Youth Forums across Canada to raise awareness and empower youth in their communities. Sophie Wertheimer, a graduate student at the University of Calgary organized Calgary's forum (which was first covered in the March 2006 issue of *Outlooks*). The two days of the forum were a moving and empowering experience that included a number of speakers and workshops, addressing the issue of HIV and AIDS from as many angles as possible. We heard from people living with and/or fighting HIV/AIDS locally and globally. We explored the issues through film, discussion and art. We learned about the social determinants of health and HIV and we left with concrete personal commitments to take action. Using this space to help raise awareness was one of mine.

I would like to thank the UNAC, Sophie Wertheimer and all those involved in making *It's Time to Act* happen. It is of great comfort that there are

people in our society willing to devote the time and effort to organizing the rest of our efforts, making it possible for us to contribute despite our myriad other commitments in life. It is mainly because of people like them that we have a chance to succeed. ▼

Here are some further resources you might consider checking out:

**aidsalgary.org, unac.org, aidsactionsida.org,
leadingtogether.ca, theglobalfund.org, who.int/3by5/en/**

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