

WORLD AIDS DAY

AIDS testing is vital to beating disease

WASHINGTON

BY RICHARD HOLBROOKE

Tomorrow is the 18th annual World AIDS Day, a time for countless statements of concern and commitment from world leaders, thousands of commemorations and remembrances, and reams of statistics. One important article has already appeared in newspapers, by Jim Yong Kim, the highly respected director of the HIV/AIDS department of the World Health Organization. After recounting the grim statistics — three million deaths in the past year alone, five million new infections this year, rising infection rates in nearly every part of the world and an admission that “good news is hard to find in the new UN report” — Kim wrote that he was nonetheless “optimistic that the epidemic can be stopped.”

I respect Kim and admire his commitment, as well as that of every foot soldier in this war. I share that commitment. With respect, then, to my friends and colleagues in the field — most far more qualified than I am — I must nonetheless mark World AIDS Day with a word of pessimism that they will not necessarily welcome. We have to face the truth: We are not winning the war on AIDS, and our current strategies are not working. Every year since the first World AIDS Day, the number of people affected has increased. The very best that can be said is that we are losing at a slightly slower rate.

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The huge, and very expensive, international effort has saved the lives of a growing number of people. I have seen some of the beneficiaries of these efforts firsthand in places as remote as rural eastern Uganda — and it is inspiring. The international assistance effort must be continued, indeed increased.

But as Kim acknowledges, “fewer than one in five people at risk of HIV infection has any access to HIV prevention information,” and this must be addressed with larger internationally supported programs. (But remember, once a person is on the drugs, it’s for life; to stop taking them is to be hit with a mutant of the original virus.) Until a vaccine is found — and that is probably more than a decade away — we must focus on prevention and treatment. Providing treatment is essential, of course, but it is also a bottomless pit as long as the disease continues to spread so fast.

As a strategy, losing more slowly is simply a recipe for an ever-more-expensive, disastrous and deadly failure, which will require more anti-AIDS drugs at ever-greater cost — a modern version of the old story of the boy with his finger in the dike. Moreover, as Kim points out, current policies require “building and strengthening health care systems in the developing world.” This is an essential long-term task with or without the AIDS crisis, but one so daunting that linking it so closely to stopping the spread of AIDS only compounds the odds against reaching either goal.

Only effective prevention strategies can stop the spread of AIDS. Yet it is precisely here that current policies have failed most seriously. In the long chain of actions required to stop the spread of AIDS, attack on all fronts is necessary. But on one vital front, the world health community has been shamefully quiet for two decades: testing and detection. Because of legitimate concerns about confidentiality and the risk of stigmatization, testing has always been voluntary, and it has been systematically played down as an important component of the effort.

The results are predictable — and fatal: According to UN figures, over 90 per cent of all those who are HIV-positive in the world do not know their status. Yet there has never been a serious and sustained campaign to get people to be tested.



Two women observe World AIDS Day during a candlelight vigil that was held on Dec. 1, 2004, in Copenhagen, Denmark.

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That means that over 90 per cent of the roughly 12,000 people around the world who will be infected today — just today! — will not know it until roughly 2013. That’s plenty of time for them to spread it further, infecting others, who will also spread it, and so on. No wonder we are losing the war against AIDS. In no other epidemic in modern history has detection been so downgraded.

When I first suggested, about three years ago, that testing and detection was the weak link in the strategy against AIDS, I was sometimes criticized for ignoring human rights. Having worked in support of human rights for more than three decades, I understand this issue and the passion it arouses. I have met monogamous women who were thrown out of their homes for a disease they got from their husbands, and people who lost jobs and friends once their condition became known.

But the spread of the disease cannot be stopped, and we cannot offer drugs to those who need them, unless people know their status. That knowledge changes people’s behaviour; many who learn that they are HIV-positive behave more carefully, and they can act on the information to save themselves and their family members. Isn’t this the most important human right of all?

Quick and reliable saliva and blood tests, which give results within 20 minutes, are available, increasing the opportunity for confidentiality. Some companies, such as the South African diamond giant DeBeers SA and its affiliated mining company, Anglo-American Corp., have started to strongly encourage testing, using these quick and confidential methods. But governments have been slow to use the

tests. In an important breakthrough, three small countries in Africa — Botswana, Malawi and especially Lesotho — recently moved from purely voluntary testing to what is called “opt-out.” Testing becomes routine in certain circumstances unless the patient opts out by refusing to be tested.

This seemingly small change has had immediate results. Testing has increased dramatically. And with increased testing has come increased awareness, less stigma, safer sex practices and more people on treatment. Without question, a reduction of the prevalence of HIV/AIDS will follow. Yet the great and influential international organizations fighting AIDS have not yet, for the most part, embraced “opt-out” as part of their core strategies.

On this World AIDS Day, many empty words and promises will be heard. I am gratified that additional money will be pledged and, as a result, more lives saved. But unless the current, failing strategy is changed, we will have to spend even more money later, to treat AIDS victims who might never have been infected had testing been more widespread. Numbers don’t lie: Everyone agrees that the number of people infected is still growing sharply, and not just in Africa. Widespread testing is not a single-bullet solution — there is none — but without knowing who is HIV-positive and who is not, there is no chance we can win this war.

• *Washington Post*

Richard Holbrooke, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, is president of the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, a nongovernmental organization.

It’s an awkward election for McGuinty, Tory

The federal election campaign could provide some awkward moments for two Ontario politicians: Premier Dalton McGuinty and Conservative Leader John Tory.

There will be pressure on both men to appear shoulder-to-shoulder with their federal counterparts — respectively, Prime Minister Paul Martin and Conservative Leader Stephen Harper — during campaign stops in this province.

Why would that be difficult for McGuinty and Tory?

Consider McGuinty’s position. Despite their shared Liberal label, the premier and the prime minister are not close. McGuinty backed John Manley against Martin for the federal leadership.

And key Martinites were active in the “dump-Dalton” campaign following the 1999 provincial election (which McGuinty lost to Mike Harris).

More recently, the federal Liberals were furious at their provincial cousins for introducing a controversial



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tax hike on the eve of the 2004 federal election.

And given the headlines about “corruption” from the Gomery inquiry, the provincial Liberals have not been keen to cosy up to federal cousins.

Latterly, the two Liberal governments have also waged a war of words over the “\$23-billion gap” — the difference between what McGuinty says Ontario pays into Canada’s wealth-transfer program and what it receives in return.

Martin at first denied the gap even exists, and then his government

dragged its feet on measures to close it.

In recent weeks, however, the federal Liberals have scrambled to make amends by signing long-awaited deals to close the gap on funding for immigration settlement and job training in the province.

Call it a death-bed repentance, if you will, but the provincial Liberals do not want to appear unappreciative.

Citing these recent deals, McGuinty declared yesterday: “We (the two governments) work pretty well together and on the basis of that experience, I will be supporting Paul Martin and the federal Liberals.”

Asked if he would appear on a platform with Martin during the campaign, McGuinty said: “I’ll make myself available.”

As for Tory, he, too, has reasons to keep his distance from federal counterpart Harper, who is often portrayed in Ontario as a scary, Harris-style Conservative. Tory wants to refashion the provincial party a la Bill Davis.

Tory suggested yesterday that sup-

porting Harper’s party was a routine matter for him as he has backed the federal Conservatives all his adult life.

True enough, but in the elections of 1993, 1997 and 2000, Tory backed the Progressive Conservatives against the Reform party (of which Harper was a founding member) and its successor, the Canadian Alliance (of which Harper became leader before taking the reins of the new federal Conservative party).

Unlike their federal cousins, Tory’s provincial Conservatives have not dropped the progressive modifier in their name.

Nonetheless, Tory yesterday downplayed the differences between the federal and provincial parties. “I don’t find him (Harper) to be a scary person,” he said.

Asked if he would appear on a platform with Harper during the campaign, Tory said: “I will do so, within the confines of my schedule.”

Conveniently, however, Tory won’t be in the country for the last two weeks

of the campaign; he has a pre-planned working trip to India and Pakistan during that period.

One more point: While both McGuinty and Tory are publicly supportive of their respective federal cousins, each has a reason to hope the other side wins.

That is, a federal Conservative government would boost McGuinty’s chances in the provincial election in 2007, and vice versa for Tory.

Why? Ontarians traditionally split their ballots federally and provincially.

The 2003 election was an aberration — the first time since the Second World War that Ontario elected a provincial Liberal government while the Liberals were in power in Ottawa.

A footnote: Provincial NDP Leader Howard Hampton will have no trouble campaigning for his federal counterpart, Jack Layton.

He was scheduled to share a platform with him last night in Toronto.

• *Ian Urquhart covers provincial affairs.*

Centre Block requires opinions of Kitchener residents

There is a hint of urgency, maybe even desperation, in the City of Kitchener’s drive to find a developer for its controversial Centre Block.

Kitchener has come a long way since the mid-1990s, bringing a downtown that had been suffering considerable urban decay into a place of entertainment attractions, active offices, two major new education facilities and affluent condo space. This council can credit itself for changing downtown Kitchener into a place people actually want to be.

But one block has resisted this revitalization. Centre Block, bounded by King, Young, Duke and Ontario streets, sits with underused buildings, a derelict heritage factory (the Forsyth building) and bulldozed space.

Even as Kitchener chalks up impressive victories elsewhere, the fact that this one block, in the centre of the core, right beside City Hall, remains unfinished, appears to be a source of embarrassment to city councillors and planners.

How else can we explain the rush of



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ideas to redevelop this site so quickly? So far this year, the city has suggested spending \$32 million toward a \$52-million central library without a clear plan of how it would raise the remaining \$20 million. The city has suggested giving the city-owned land away to developers. They have the low-income residents of the Mayfair Hotel worried about where they’ll live next year. And they have endured criticism from various groups and individuals, including Record columnist Martin DeGroot and Christian Aagaard, that they are not paying attention to public advice and holding meetings behind closed

doors.

Given its prominent location, the Centre Block has the potential to be the jewel in the downtown’s crown and we should be prepared to contemplate something spectacular, like a central library if the public calls for it. However, a poor planning decision could also turn it into a prominent carbuncle. Rather, the potential remains, and the City of Kitchener should be willing to take whatever time it takes to redevelop the property properly. It should be open to all sorts of ideas from the community.

And reports that certain meetings have been held behind closed doors, and the concerns raised that public input isn’t being considered seriously, recalls an earlier decision to revamp downtown Kitchener, one that bulldozed the city’s beautiful neo-classical city hall and replaced it with Market Square.

That’s the decision that kicked off the 20-year period of downtown decay that the city has only just climbed out from. More recently as a result of part-

nership meetings behind closed doors, the City of Waterloo has had to deal with the fallout of its relationship with MFP Financial Services Ltd. and cost overruns at RIM Park.

To ensure the best outcome for the citizens of the region, an open process must be the order of the day. Ultimately, this effort to renew downtown Kitchener is being done for the benefit of Kitchener’s residents, so they must be allowed to have an active voice in the proceedings, and they must be given time enough to raise those voices.

It’s important to note that the revitalization of downtown Kitchener has been underway for over a decade. The Kaufman building stood as an empty factory for almost 10 years before developers turned it into affluent lofts. The Goudies department store was a husk for even longer before the children’s museum materialized.

Consider how long St. Jerome’s stood vacant before Wilfrid Laurier University agreed to move its school of social work, or how long the Epton factory stood, first as contaminated land

and now as a parking lot, before the University of Waterloo planned to put its school of pharmacy there. Consider how long the former Eaton building stood nearly empty before its lofts were installed.

There has been no secret formula on how each block has been brought back from the dead. It has all come down to hard work and, most importantly, patience. Likewise, there is no magic bullet to revitalize the Centre Block, and the city shouldn’t be searching for one. And while the city should be prepared to spend a lot of time, money and effort to turn this into the jewel in the downtown’s crown, it should not expect a solution to materialize quickly or through half-measures.

Take the time, make the effort — spend the full \$52 million on a central library if that’s what the community tells you to do, but, most importantly, listen to the people of Kitchener.

• *James Bow of Kitchener is a graduate of the University of Waterloo’s regional and urban planning department.*