

BY: Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

DATE: 17:00 – 18:30, 19 October 2009

PLACE: Marriott Rive Gauche Hotel and Conference Center, Paris France

OCCASION: AIDS Vaccine Conference hosted by the French National Agency for Research on AIDS and the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise

Scientists as Activists

Honourable Chairpersons, Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, Jean-Francois Delfraissy and Yves Levy,

Dr Alan Bernstein and Dr Seth Berkley,

Fellow delegates,

I am humbled to be among the world's brightest scientific minds that are working harder than ever to develop the vaccine that will transform the world.

Modest efficacy; major boost for hope

This is an exciting time to be among AIDS vaccine researchers—even more exciting than I anticipated when I accepted the invitation months ago.

We have witnessed a significant moment in the AIDS field with the announcement of the results of the Phase III trial in Thailand of a combination HIV vaccine candidate.

As you know, the results presented thus far from the Thai trial are modest. Yet that the results are not conclusive is to miss the point—the point is that they provide much needed hope to the scientific community.

Even without the Thai trial results, this is an important and exciting gathering because of other developments animating the AIDS vaccine field. Just weeks ago we got promising news about two new and potent broadly neutralizing antibodies to HIV, and that researchers identified the site on the virus to which the antibodies attach. This appears to be a good target for immunogen design.

Since the announcement of the Thai trial results, there has been some noise about how best to interpret the data. This is a debate for you scientists to have, here and in other forums, to scrutinize the data in a transparent and rigorous manner.

I hope you will not lose sight of the big picture: which is that the efficacy results of the Thai trial, whether this or that percentage, whether just inside or just outside statistical significance, most of all provide the field of AIDS vaccine research a lead to follow. It's a lead you've never had before: the potential—no guarantee, but the potential—to identify correlates of immunity for HIV. Nothing in this world is perfect. Those of us who work in the UN system know that very well.

This is also an opportunity to renew our hope. Hope, my friends, and the conviction that it inspires, is what has enabled millions of people living with HIV to fight, against all odds, to change the world.

Hope is what drives me.

As recently as three weeks ago when I was meeting with Heads of State, with captains of industry, with media figures, few were talking about AIDS—and when they did it was often with apathy and despair. Since the news of the vaccine trial broke—AIDS has been back at the top of the agenda with renewed hope and passion. You have given the AIDS response a huge boost.

So I would like to pay my personal respects to the developers of the vaccine candidate, to the trial sponsors and collaborators, to the partners in the Royal Thai Government and at the community level that supported the trial. And most of all, to the many volunteers who made the boldest contribution to this scientific advance. It is good to see that much of the research and development aimed at creating a vaccine is being conducted in, by and for the developing world. I am so pleased that scientists in developing countries are taking up key functions in applied research as well, for example in immunogen design in India and South Africa. The United Nations salutes you.

There are many reasons for hope. Your programme is full of exhilarating sessions reporting developments which will animate the AIDS vaccine field. It is clear that your perseverance is paying off. One cannot predict the duration of your journey to licensable HIV vaccines, but one does begin to feel that the wind is in your sails. This conference shows that science offers us enormous opportunities for finding a vaccine, or a cure or both. And that must be our ultimate goal: ending this epidemic, not just coping with it.

Scientists as activists

But make no mistake, as scientists you must not deliberate solely among yourselves—you must be ambassadors, advocates and even activists for the primacy of scientific evidence in AIDS policy making.

The AIDS response desperately needs the full and active engagement of scientists in public life. Engagement to ensure that the fruits of scientific endeavour are not neglected or subject to political manipulation. Such is the noble aim of the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise, an international alliance of researchers, funders and advocates.

My friends, the history of the AIDS epidemic is distinguished by a long and rich tradition of scientific activism. I urge you to remain at the forefront of writing the next chapter that will put an end to this epidemic.

My friends, five thousand scientist-activists signed the Durban Declaration at the 13th International AIDS conference in 2000. This act changed the course of the response in South Africa and marked a critical step in the revolutionary movement for universal access to treatment.

We now need a revolutionary movement for universal access to prevention. As you are likely keenly aware, for every two people newly starting treatment, five more people are newly infected with HIV. Your voice, the voice of science, is needed to inform and inspire this prevention movement and break the trajectory of the epidemic. By making your results accessible and understandable so they can be transformed into action. By engaging with civil society and policy makers. By making science the agent for social change.

As scientists pushing the frontiers of our understanding, I urge you to ensure that your understanding leads to the kind of changes that will bring about universal access to HIV prevention. Not only more prevention but new and better types of prevention.

To get new prevention tools we need to invest in research and development. So I call on all of those who support your work—public and private donors, investors, the academy—to now redouble their investment so that you can accelerate your efforts, take advantage of your momentum and close the gap between the promise and reality of an HIV vaccine.

The world needs a vaccine

As you all know, the UN General Assembly and the G8 resolved to reach universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care by 2010. We are still falling short on those goals. Today over 4 million people are on ART, an increase of 36% in just one year. But the treatment gap remains enormous – we are reaching only 41% of those in need of treatment. It is unacceptable that there are still over 5,000 people dying of AIDS every day.

We need to do two things to turn this around.

We need to expand access to ensure universal access to prevention, treatment, care and support.

But we can not just treat our way out of this epidemic. We must do to everything in our power to bring this pandemic to an end. A safe and effective vaccine, in the absence of affordable curative therapy, is the only breakthrough which can turn the tide of this pandemic. A vaccine provides that hope. We need to redouble our scientific efforts on this marathon journey. The research and costs may appear high—but that is a false economy. In the longer run we can not afford not to make this investment.

I am pleased to see so many representatives of the pharmaceutical industry here today. You are central to this mission. I call on you to shift your focus from cost to compassion. We have worked together in the past to find creative solutions to bring down the costs of treatment. I am not naïve—I recognize your need to thrive—but ask you to help ensure the world survives.

At UNAIDS we will renew our partnership with the vaccine community to prepare for the day when a highly effective vaccine is available.

Universal access to combination prevention

At UNAIDS, we will continue to strengthen collaboration with our many partners. We will also continue our quest to ensure effective HIV prevention methods are accessible to all.

Combination prevention packages include biomedical, behavioural, and structural interventions to reduce sexual transmission—including condom use, treatment of sexually transmitted infections, harm reduction for injecting drug users among others.

So I call on all of those who support your work--public and private donors, investors, the academy, the broader scientific community, government officials and regulators, communities, the international community of which UNAIDS is a part-- to now redouble their backing, commitment, and investment so that you can accelerate your efforts, to seize this momentum, and close the gap between the promise of AIDS vaccines and the reality.

But most of all we count on your leadership and commitment — people who can speak with unimpeachable scientific authority—to move the mountains of inertia to stop new HIV infections and to bring an end to this epidemic.

Let 2009 be remembered in the history of this epidemic as the year the world turned the corner. Together we can do it.

Thank you.

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