

Reflections on HIV/AIDS

One on one with Dr. Julio Montaner, outgoing president of the International AIDS Society

Dr. Julio Montaner, director of the BC Centre of Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) at St. Paul's Hospital and UBC/St. Paul's Hospital Foundation Chair in AIDS, was president of the International AIDS Society (IAS) from 2008 to 2010. We recently spoke to him about his years as IAS president, his role as chair of the XVIII International AIDS Conference in Vienna and his continuing work to turn the tide against the AIDS epidemic.

Promise Magazine (PM): What are your overall reflections of your time as president of the International AIDS Society?

Dr. Montaner: Being at the helm of the world's leading association of HIV professionals – uniting 14,000 members from 190 countries worldwide in a common cause – has been a truly rewarding experience.

One of the highlights of my time as president was as Chair at the 2010 International AIDS Conference in Vienna in July. Thousands of people gathered in the streets to march for human rights, which echoed the theme of the conference, *Rights Here, Right Now*. The theme was chosen to show that there can be no end to the AIDS pandemic unless we secure full protection of human rights for the people most vulnerable to HIV and AIDS.

The energy of the participants that night reinforced the overriding impression I had throughout the week – and throughout my time as president – that we are in this fight together and we will win.

PM: What is the state of HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention today?

Dr. Montaner: We have effective treatments

and we need to get them to people suffering from HIV who are medically eligible for treatment. The work done at the BC-CfE has shown that HAART [highly active antiretroviral therapy] is not only highly effective at preventing HIV-related illness and deaths, it also dramatically decreases HIV transmission. This has now been widely accepted as the way to stop the spread of HIV, and in fact, I am proud to tell you that WHO [World Health Organization] and UNAIDS [Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS] have called for the global elimination of HIV transmission, citing the results of our work here at the BC-CfE as evidence to support that movement.

PM: How are we doing with the 2010 deadline for universal access to treatment and prevention set by world leaders in 2005?

Dr. Montaner: Well, it was a bold and visionary objective to begin with, and with almost five million more people on HAART than in 2005, we have enjoyed unprecedented rollout success. But, we are less than halfway to meeting our target, and I'm deeply disappointed

with the recent G8/G20 meetings in Canada, where a lack of commitment to universal access was all too evident.

That said, science and understanding have evolved since the original universal access pledge, strengthening the economic and medical argument for it. The treatment-as-prevention strategy is truly a game-changer, because it dramatically enhances the return on the investment of the universal access pledge. So, while significant challenges lie ahead, there's a lot to be optimistic about as we move forward, and as I said loud and clear in Vienna, "We have no plans to let anybody stop us."





Outgoing IAS president Dr. Julio Montaner says the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS' groundbreaking development of highly active antiretroviral therapy is helping to shape a widely accepted strategy for decreasing the transmission of HIV.

PM: Where do we go from here in the fight against HIV/AIDS? What are the priorities?

Dr. Montaner: Today, the only thing stopping us from controlling HIV is the stigma, discrimination, persecution, prosecution and criminalization of infected, affected and at-risk populations.

Our priority now is to keep up the pressure on governments – Canada included – to honour their 2005 pledge to universal access.

We must also strengthen our outreach efforts. People with HIV tend to require other supports, such as housing and harm reduction. Those supports are essential to bringing

treatment to those at risk. If we avoid tackling these difficult issues, we'll undermine the effort to control HIV/AIDS, as well as other infectious diseases like Hepatitis C.

In that context, I'm pleased to tell you that the IAS and the Vienna Conference fully embraced the Vancouver-born Vienna Declaration calling for the decriminalization of drug use. The war on drugs has failed to meet its stated objectives and it's high time we move on to embrace evidence-based public health policies in this regard. The Vienna Declaration, now endorsed by over 10,000 scientists from around the world, represents a major step in this direction.

PM: What's your assessment of the response to the Vienna Declaration so far?

Dr. Montaner: As of mid-August 2010, barely three weeks after it was officially launched in Vienna, it had more than 16,000 signatures from the health and medical community, the public and the science community, including six Nobel Laureates and three former Latin American presidents.

PM: What can people do to support the cause?

Dr. Montaner: Sign the Declaration. Anyone wishing to find out more or endorse the document can easily do so online at www.viennadeclaration.com. ■