



World AIDS Day

by Thomas Netter

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"I appeal to all who are in this room, and to those who are beyond it, to cast aside their fears and prejudices, their weaknesses, and their doubts. Let us face the future with the conviction that AIDS can be vanquished. On this day, let us turn to those around us, and those around the world, and say 'We are part of an unprecedented worldwide crusade, today, tomorrow and in the years to come.'"

With these words, Dr Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of WHO, opened the first World AIDS Day on 1 December 1988. Speaking to people with AIDS, leaders from the United Nations system, governments, religious, social, cultural and youth organizations, WHO staff and invited guests, Dr Nakajima's words formally inaugurated the first day on which the whole world was united against AIDS.

World AIDS Day 1988 was the

culmination of an extraordinary year of global mobilisation against AIDS. It began in January when more than 140 ministers of health and government representatives, meeting in London at the first World Summit of Ministers of Health on Programmes for AIDS Prevention, declared 1988 to be a year of communication and cooperation about AIDS. It was a year when every country in the world voted with its action to support and participate in the global struggle against this disease, while organizations, groups and individuals in all nations joined the worldwide effort.

On 1 December 1988, information about AIDS reached every country – spanning all boundaries, traversing all continents – with the themes of compassion, understanding and global solidarity.

Beginning at dawn on 1 December in Oceania with worldwide radio

broadcasts on international networks, WHO monitored World AIDS Day events from its headquarters in Geneva. Dozens of radio, television and print interviews with Dr Nakajima and with Dr Jonathan Mann, Director of the WHO Global Programme on AIDS, as well as with other WHO specialists were broadcast in a variety of languages. A global telecast that included material about AIDS from over a dozen countries was broadcast live and seen in more than 50 countries. Print media reported on the day, or like their colleagues in broadcasting, used World AIDS Day as a platform on which to review developments in the

An attentive young audience took part in a series of events during World AIDS Day last December at WHO headquarters in Geneva.



WHO/E. Mandelmann

Dr Jonathan Mann, Director of WHO's Global Programme on AIDS, faced the cameras of the media on the first World AIDS Day.

AIDS pandemic and look to future prospects.

"World AIDS Day was a day that brought us a little closer to our common goal of understanding, compassion, and the confidence that together we will dominate this disease," Dr Mann said. "It was a day of people – of memories, faces, and voices – reminding us of what we have already accomplished, and how much more there is to be done."

In the most diverse corners of the globe, the memories of the past and the urgent demands of the future were recalled, highlighted and projected on to a vast screen of peoples' lives. Throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America, new AIDS control programmes got under way and care centres were opened. Everywhere, organizers began new projects or stepped up existing efforts. Parades, seminars, meetings, and various ceremonies to mark the day and provide a stage for discussion and reflection took place.

In many countries, portions of the huge quilt of the San Francisco-based Names Project Foundation were displayed as a tribute to people who had

died of AIDS, while new panels and quilt-making groups inaugurated their own global memorials. Thousands of organizations delivered their messages of compassion, hope and dedication to every country and to millions of people around the world.

"Let us not forget the human dimension," said Richard Rector, a 32-year-old health educator, who spoke as one of the hundreds of thousands of people with AIDS during the opening ceremonies in Geneva. "World AIDS Day is also about people, people who are committed in a spirit of understanding, compassion and solidarity to an effective AIDS response."

Effective response

That theme of people building an effective response to AIDS will echo throughout the 1989 events of World AIDS Day, again to be staged on 1 December. Although programmes for AIDS prevention are being developed in nearly every country in the world, in many regions the epidemic of AIDS and HIV-infection continues to worsen. The number of persons reported to be infected with HIV or suffering from AIDS is rising. As people with HIV infection develop AIDS, the personal, political and social strain increases.

For these reasons, World AIDS Day

1989 will focus on youth. This means informing young people that the risk of HIV is real; that infection with HIV can be avoided through personal behaviour; that people with AIDS and HIV infection should receive care and respect; and that AIDS can be stopped everywhere by building a sustainable, lasting worldwide effort.

This will entail giving youth encouragement and the means to organize World AIDS Day activities; letting young people talk between themselves and others about the risk of AIDS, about caring for people with AIDS, and about the global mobilization underway against AIDS. It will require all of us to learn all we can about AIDS so that we can sustain and reinforce the global effort to stop its spread.

Young people are crucial to AIDS prevention and control. Very often it is during adolescence that people begin to experiment with sexual activity and, in some regions, drug injecting activity. Paradoxically, while youth may be more likely than others to engage in risk behaviours, they are often less likely to be aware of the risks of HIV transmission. In some cases they may be uninformed of how HIV is transmitted; frank discussion about sexual and drug taking activity is inhibited; and, where there is knowledge of HIV, they may often fail to appreciate the risk.

At the same time, these are the people who are most capable of organizing dynamic, imaginative and effective AIDS prevention and control activities. On World AIDS Day 1988, many activities involving young people had a tremendous impact in conveying messages about AIDS prevention and about non-discrimination.

World AIDS Day 1989 will heighten awareness about the risk of HIV infection and AIDS disease; strengthen AIDS prevention activities and programmes at all levels of society, and provide the basis for continuing activities against AIDS; promote respect and care for people with AIDS and HIV infection, and call for action to reduce their suffering; and create lasting dialogue, sustained activity and long-term commitment both within and between countries, peoples and individuals of all ages.

World AIDS Day is a day to strengthen the global spirit of solidarity, tolerance and understanding for people infected with HIV or AIDS disease through knowledge, compassion and action. Through the activities that everyone will display on 1 December 1989, we can establish a worldwide and determined effort to Stop AIDS. ■