

International AIDS Conference V: last tango in Montreal?

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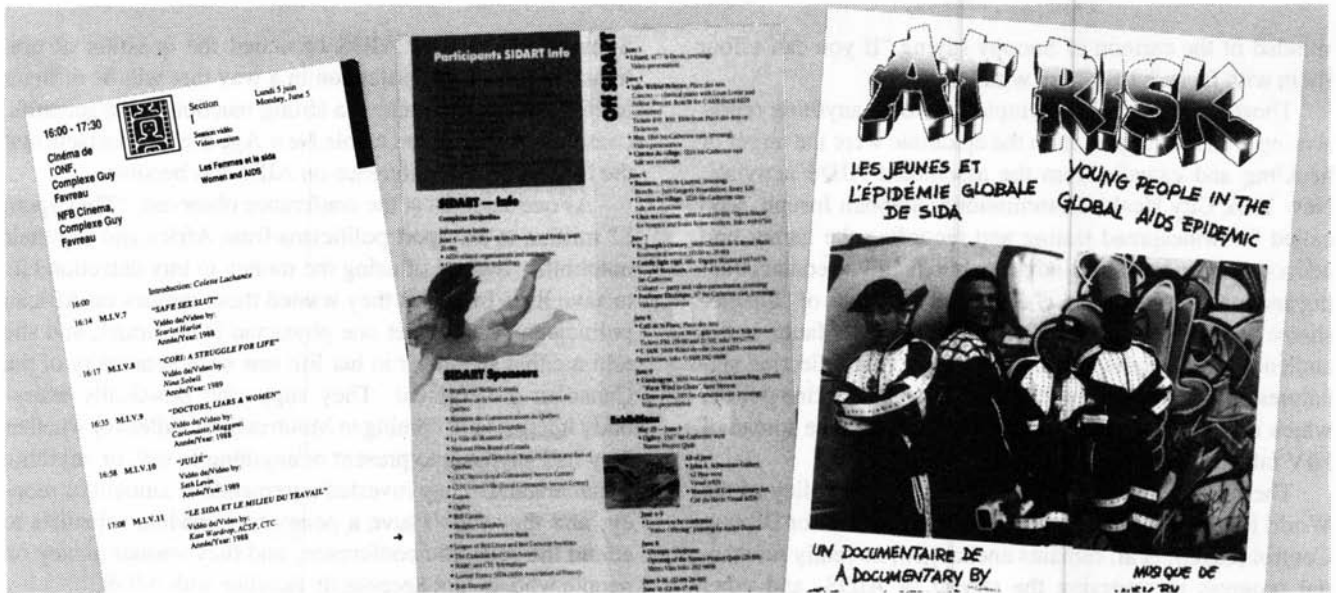
The Fifth International Conference on AIDS, held at the Palais des Congrès in Montreal from June 4 to June 9, may do little to halt the spread of AIDS but it may well have done much to halt the spread of the International Conference on AIDS. With each passing year, conference organizers have been obsessed with covering up the lack of progress in stopping this species-threatening pandemic, by staging larger and more spectacular versions of this annual soiree. This year's bash, which attracted over 11,000 participants—somewhat short of the projected 18,000—and over 900 journalists, was the biggest, the gaudiest, and perhaps the last such spectacle to be inflicted on what remains of the scientific community.

One reason this year's conference wasn't even more unwieldy is that the entire issue of central nervous system involvement in AIDS was the subject of a separate satellite conference in Quebec City on May 31-June 3. Yet another conference, the First International Symposium on Oral AIDS, was held at the Palais des Congrès immediately prior to the Fifth International Conference.

The opening ceremonies were preempted by a group of homosexual activists from the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP). This was the group that gave then-Vice President George Bush a hard time at the Third International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C. in 1987. This year, they and other AIDS activists and persons with AIDS were invited, for the first time, to be delegates and participants in the conference.

The conference organizers gave them permission to read a manifesto from the podium prior to the opening speaker, with the understanding that they would then leave the podium and let the conference proceed. Having delivered this oration criticizing Canadian health officials for not spending enough money on the problem, and demanding free treatment for all AIDS patients, no quarantine, and no mass testing, 50 or so of the group refused to relinquish the podium for nearly an hour.

During this period, while the audience patiently waited for the opening cere-



Some of the brochures offered for edification at the Montreal AIDS conference, and a page from the program.

monies to begin, the occupants of the podium held an extended press conference with the assembled media. As this continued, people began leaving the hall assuming that the program had been canceled.

Video voodoo

The demonstrators finally relinquished the podium and the conference officially began, however not to be outdone in tastelessness by the demonstrators, the conference itself began with a "rap" video entitled "At Risk: Young People in the Global AIDS Epidemic."

To quote from the conference brochure, "The film is about six young people and their views of love, sexuality, relationships, drugs, AIDS, family, violence, and their future aspirations. The film examines the stark implications of growing up in the shadow of the AIDS epidemic, in which many young people sense a threat against love. 'At Risk' shows how young people are living with serious risks. AIDS is an increasing threat, as are drugs, environmental destruction, the global arms race, and increasing violence." All of this to a background of loud, satanic, Reggae music by something called Quincy Delight.

This bit of New Age propaganda, co-produced by Global Village Information AB of Sweden, succeeded in driving some more people from the hall. However not everyone was offended by these videos and in fact an entire section of the conference was devoted to AIDS videos with such appealing titles as "Safe Sex Slut" produced by someone, or something, called "Scarlot Harlot." In addition there was an entire display of SIDArt (AIDS art) for those with a taste for bio-socially relevant pornography.

Dr. Jonathan Mann, director of the Global AIDS Program of the World Health Organization (WHO), estimated the

number of infected individuals at 5-10 million and stated, "The epidemic is still dynamic. The virus has not plateaued. It has not peaked." Dr. Mann went on to claim that quarantine had never stopped the spread of any infectious disease and that while "we expect the decade of the 1990s will be worse—and perhaps much worse—than the 1980s, there is a source for optimism . . . in the strength and diversity of community-based programs, where you have evidence of success in beginning to prevent infection and treat people who are ill." Interestingly in the course of his speech Mann felt it necessary to deny the possibility that AIDS represented genocide against black populations.

Dr. Mann's credibility on this issue wasn't helped by the performance of Mechai Viravaida, founder of the Population and Community Development Association of Thailand, in the opening plenary session of the conference. Mechai, otherwise known as the "Condom King," punctuated his speech on encouraging children to use condoms by demonstrating various "educational games" such as blowing up condoms like balloons.

As the epidemic continues to spread, and it becomes more and more evident that present scientific and other efforts cannot stop it, the number of sessions at the conference appears to be the only thing that is keeping pace with the number of infections. This year, in addition to sessions on Epidemiology and Public Health, Clinical Aspects, and Basic Research, there were sessions on AIDS and the Individual; AIDS, Society and Behavior; Ethics and Law; International Issues; The Economic Impact of AIDS; and an audiovisual session. The purpose of the latter sessions appears to be that of ensuring that if anything positive comes out of the first three sessions it will not be allowed to interfere with the present "New Age" approach to public health. One is re-

mind of the cartoon of Snoopy saying "If you can't floor them with facts, baffle them with bull—."

Those scientists who attempted to voice anything representing a serious approach to the epidemic were the target of heckling and catcalls from the assembled AIDS activists. New York City Health Commissioner Stephen Joseph, who called for widespread testing and recording the names and addresses of seropositive individuals to facilitate contact tracing and medical followup, was greeted by shouts of "Shame, shame" and "Resign, resign" from the lavender fauna in the audience. Outside the hall another group was collecting signatures on a petition to protest the Cuban quarantine policy, which is admitted to have substantially slowed the spread of HIV infection in Cuba.

The problem is that as long as the current policy of the World Health Organization (WHO), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), et al. remains unchanged, no really substantial progress in reversing the spread of AIDS, and other epidemic diseases such as tuberculosis, will be made. The scientific sessions, for the most part, simply confirm what was predictable once the nature of HIV was determined. All of the slogans about education and safe sex have not changed the fact that the infection is still spreading and, again quoting Dr. Mann: "We expect the that the decade of the 1990s will be worse—and perhaps much worse—than the 1980s."

There is growing evidence of cracks in the official "line" on mass testing, as evidenced by Dr. Stephen Joseph's speech during the opening plenary session. The First International

Symposium on Oral AIDS broached the question of oral transmission of HIV infection in a way that will be difficult to contain. Finally there is a strong reaction in the scientific community against the whole New Age media spectacle that the International Conference on AIDS has become.

As one scientist at the conference observed, "They spent \$2 million to transport politicians from Africa and pay their hotel bills. Instead of using the money to buy detection kits to save lives in Africa they wasted these monies on African politicians. Then I met one physician from Brazil, and she told me that she never in her life saw such generosity of the Canadian government. They supported practically everybody interested in coming to Montreal, regardless of whether they had anything to present or anything to say, or anything to understand! They invested a tremendous amount of money, and they didn't give a penny to Canadian scientists to attend the scientific conference, and they wasted money on people who are not necessarily familiar with AIDS."

He continued: "What was important was to organize the biggest junk conference in the world, and that's why a conference on scientific program was attacked by scientists. That's why Gallo attacked them. He said clearly, 'I saw a lot of faces, and I don't think that I was obliged to see them.' He said on French TV, 'Next year I will think two times before going to San Francisco, and I will request first a scientific program prior to going there.' So, I think the Fifth Conference has practically killed the future of world conferences on AIDS."

A slice of life, and death, in Montreal

The conference looks like a combination of a Roman carnival and a rubber industry trade fair, a grotesque happening with countless condom stands, condom videos, machines to test condom resistance to breakage, and machines to shoot at condoms. Out of 6,000 posters at the conference, perhaps 2,000 deal with research, epidemiology, and clinical medicine. The majority deal with "safe (non-reproductive) sex," homosexual rights and feelings, euthanasia, medical cost cutting, and the advantages of dying at home. It is a scene reminiscent of Bruegel's "Dance of Death" or the flagellants of the Dark Ages.

Each day one is treated to the videos. The June 7 noon seminar is on "Erotica," the resumé reads: "Porn has controversy. Few remain indifferent to its existence or availability. This session combines several views of the contemporary construction of porn within the context of Safer Sex education." The speakers' titles are: "Working with

the Film Language of Porn" (a German view), "Lace Up or Lose It" (U.K., on censorship), "Anthropologist as Voyeur" (a view from Quebec).

The June 8 session is on the use of "rap" music for AIDS. But nothing beats the poster entitled "Garlic in the treatment of AIDS."

Two thousand people wander about, and the scientists are angry. One leading French virologist was asked what he thought of this conference, "This is nuts, meaningless. We don't need rap sessions about the psychological problems of our patients, we are with them daily. We don't need to come all the way here to hear cheap talk about psychology. This conference shows zero progress on treatment, absolutely nothing."

A scientist from an English-speaking African country is more blunt: "I'm depressed, I'm a depressed scientist, I can't stand this anymore. How many such conferences to 'gather the data' is WHO going to organize before it decides it can act? My concern is that nothing is being done now, just pretenses. The epidemic of AIDS is spreading in Africa, people are falling ill everywhere, and WHO has not even organized one program in one community to do something." —*Garance Chau*