

# CANADA HOSTS WORLD AIDS CONFERENCE

## Introduction

### Focus

This year's annual International AID Conference was held in Toronto, and it provided the country with a chance to review the current state of the disease in Canada and to debate whether or not we are doing enough for those suffering from the disease in the developing world.

### Did you know . . .

HIV infects cells of the immune system—called T-cells—that protect us from attack by viruses, bacteria, and other “bugs.” One in three people infected with HIV actually dies from tuberculosis.

Is AIDS old news? You'd think so. After all, it was 25 years ago that the disease first emerged as a global threat to humans. Literally everyone living today has heard of HIV/AIDS, and many people know someone who has contracted the disease. But if AIDS is old news, then people would have changed the practices that spread the disease, and the disease would be on the decline. Right? But that is not the case. In fact, the 2006 UN report on the global AIDS epidemic states that approximately 25 million people around the world have died of the disease since the early 1980s. Currently, 38.6 million people are living with HIV. And almost five million more are infected every year.

Today, there are really two different AIDS realities. If you live in a wealthy, developed nation like Canada, you have access to education and condoms that seriously reduce your risk of contracting the disease. If you do contract HIV, you have access to powerful antiretroviral drugs that make it possible for you to live with the virus for many, many years. In fact, these drugs may prevent your HIV from ever mutating into full-blown AIDS.

For those living in a developing nation, however, the reality of AIDS is

quite different. You would probably not have affordable access to condoms. If you were female, you would likely have little control over your body. As a result, you would likely have to marry at a young age and have sex with your husband according to his demands. You would likely not have the right to refuse your husband, and not be able to get him to wear a condom, even if you knew he was having sex with other people.

These issues were at the forefront of the International Aids Conference held in Toronto in August 2006. This huge conference involved over 24 000 people and attempted to get to the heart of the AIDS epidemic.

At the very least, the annual conference raises the profile of HIV/AIDS throughout the world. At best, the conference leads to more dollars being spent on the epidemic and brings the world closer to the point where we can say that the number of HIV/AIDS cases has peaked. Until that time, many would argue that the International AIDS Conference plays an important role in keeping the pressure on governments, businesses, and individuals to step up to the plate and contribute to the fight against AIDS.

## To Consider

1. What is the purpose of the annual International AIDs Conference?

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2. How well informed are you about AIDS and related issues? Explain fully.

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## *Video Review*

Respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. What progress has been made against AIDS in the developed world?  
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2. What problems have arisen because of the progress against AIDS in the developed world?  
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3. Why do some Canadians not take the drugs they are prescribed?  
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4. How does the progress made against the disease in the developed world contrast with the situation in some African countries and other parts of the developing world?  
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5. Who is at the forefront of the world's campaign against AIDS? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Record some of the medical advances that have been made in the fight against HIV/AIDS.  
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7. Why have these advances not been enough to eradicate the disease?  
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8. Who were some of the high-profile people who attended the conference? What was their contribution?  
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\_\_\_\_\_
9. What Canadian politician was notably absent? \_\_\_\_\_
10. What country did Stephen Lewis specifically attack in his speech at the conference? Why?  
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11. In your opinion, does the video indicate that the tide against the disease has turned, or not? Provide specific details to support your answer.  
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## *The Toronto Conference*

### Further Research

The 16th International AIDS Conference meetings and reports are available online at [www.aids2006.org](http://www.aids2006.org). The World Health Organization Web site is at [www.who.int/en/](http://www.who.int/en/).

### Further Research

To learn more about the works of the Gates Foundation, go to [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org). For more on the work of Bill Clinton's foundation, visit [www.clinton.org](http://www.clinton.org).

Dr. Kevin De Cock is in charge of the HIV/AIDS portfolio for the World Health Organization. He believes those involved in the global fight against AIDS have between five and seven years to turn around the tide of the disease. If it isn't, he believes the world's attention span will be exhausted, charitable donations will dry up, governments will turn to other matters, and the world will turn its back on those who suffer from the disease.

The organizers of the 16th International AIDS Conference agree with the concerns of the World Health Organization. "Time to Deliver" was the theme of the 16th International AIDS Conference, and it highlighted the urgency that the time for action is now.

There is no doubt that the International AIDS Conference is the most important and influential of the many AIDS conferences held each year. More than 24 000 delegates attended the 2006 conference, along with a number of high-profile investors, politicians, scientists, and celebrities. Stephen Lewis, the United Nations' Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, Bill Gates of Microsoft Corporation, and Bill Clinton, former president of the United States, gave speeches. Actors Richard Gere, Olympia Dukakis, and Sandra Oh attended. Musicians Alicia Keys, Chantal Kreviazuk, the Barenaked Ladies, and Our Lady Peace performed at the event.

It was important for the conference to be such a high-profile event because high-profile events raise money. Lots of money. In fact, on the eve of the conference, Bill and Melinda Gates, who have already contributed millions of dollars toward the global fight against HIV/AIDS, announced another US\$500-million donation. But Gates warned in his speech at the conference that the amount is really a drop in the bucket and that governments need to step up to the plate.

In his speech to the conference, Bill Clinton attacked politicians who are unwilling to talk about the issues that will truly put an end to the epidemic. One particular example of this is new research that indicates male circumcision may drastically reduce transmission rates of HIV in countries where the disease is rampant. This is because the penis's foreskin is made up of cells particularly susceptible to infection—and may also be effective at transmitting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. In addition, researchers believe that the foreskin traps fluid, allowing the virus to live longer on an uncircumcised penis after intercourse and increasing the likelihood of infection. Clinton argued that governments and policymakers need to be willing to look at factual research and take steps to implement change despite cultural or religious practices that may make these changes unpopular.

### To Consider

1. Do you think multimillion-dollar donations such as the one made by Bill and Melinda Gates help the global fight against HIV/AIDS or hurt it by taking pressure off governments to do more? Provide reasons for your opinion.
2. Why would it be difficult for governments to introduce circumcision in countries where tradition and/or religion forbid it?

# CANADA HOSTS WORLD AIDS CONFERENCE

## *Stephen Lewis*

Stephen Lewis may well be remembered in the history books as perhaps the greatest Canadian of all time. He is currently the United Nation's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa. In this role he has campaigned tirelessly against the disease and has been an outspoken critic of governments who fail to take the necessary action to fight the epidemic.

At the 16th International AIDS Conference, Lewis blasted G8 countries for not living up to their AIDS funding promises. At their 2005 G8 summit in Scotland, for example, the countries agreed to finance the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. The Global Fund—the lead funding agency for AIDS—faces a US\$500-million shortfall this year, despite a recent pledge of half-a-billion dollars from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In his speech, Lewis warned: “We are on the cusp of a huge financial crisis. No one is asking for any more than was promised. Everything in the battle against AIDS is being jeopardized by the G8.”

Lewis also took aim at the South African government, saying that of all the things that have infuriated him in his work fighting AIDS, “South Africa is the unkindest cut of all.” South African President Thabo Mbeki only recently accepted the link between HIV and AIDS and continues to challenge the use of antiretroviral drugs for the treatment of AIDS. South Africa's minister of health, Dr. Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, continues to promote the use of lemons, garlic, and beet root as a natural way to treat HIV infection. Tshabalala-Msimang actually

used South Africa's booth in the exhibition hall of the Toronto conference to promote this natural recipe.

It is estimated that 5.5 million South Africans are living with HIV, accounting for more than one-eighth of the estimated cases worldwide. UNAIDS estimates that more than 19 per cent of people aged 15 to 49 in that country are HIV-positive. Misinformation provided by the South African government has contributed to fear and ignorance on the part of the South African people. Many who have contracted HIV refuse to take antiretroviral drugs because they do not believe they are necessary. In his speech, Lewis said that South Africa “is the only country in Africa whose government continues to promote theories more worthy of a lunatic fringe than of a concerned and compassionate state.”

As a result of his criticism of the South African government, Lewis has been barred from United Nations work in the country. He realizes that some people believe it is not appropriate for a United Nations envoy to publicly condemn a member state of the United Nations. But Lewis responds to this criticism by saying that he will not be silenced by a government when he knows that what it is doing is “wrong, immoral, and indefensible.”

In his speech, Lewis also focused on the fact that in his work against AIDS it has become obvious that the inequality of women is what puts them at high risk of becoming infected. Lewis stressed that the spread of HIV cannot be stemmed until women in developing countries have control over their bodies. “It is the one area of HIV and AIDS which leaves me feeling most helpless

and most enraged,” he said. “It’s a ghastly, deadly business, this untrammelled oppression of women in so many countries on the planet.”

(All Stephen Lewis quotes were taken from “South Africa’s HIV policy bashed in closing session of AIDS summit.” by Beth Duff-Brown in *Northwest Florida Daily News* online edition, August 18, 2006, [www.nwfdailynews.com/articleArchive/aug2006/aidssummitsafricabash.php](http://www.nwfdailynews.com/articleArchive/aug2006/aidssummitsafricabash.php).)

Although Lewis became internationally recognized in his position as the UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa he has worked tirelessly for a more humane, equitable world throughout his career as a politician, diplomat, and activist. As you read through his achievements below, think about all of the people Lewis has affected in his lifetime.

- Leader of the NDP Party in Ontario during the 1970s.
- Appointed Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations in 1984. He chaired the committee that drafted the five-year UN Programme on African Economic Recovery.
- From 1995 to 1999 he was Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF.
- In 1997 he was involved in an investigation into genocide in Rwanda.
- From 2000 to 2006 he has been UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa.
- In 2006 he was a commissioner for the World Health Organization and he began a one-year term at McMaster University, where he will serve as an instructor with the Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition.

## Research Activity

Stephen Lewis also established the Stephen Lewis Foundation, which funds community-based initiatives in Africa. The foundation currently funds over 100 projects with more than 50 organizations in 14 countries. The details of these projects are listed at [www.stephenlewisfoundation.org](http://www.stephenlewisfoundation.org). With a partner, or in a small group, select one of these projects and prepare a short report to present to your class.

### Notes:

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# CANADA HOSTS WORLD AIDS CONFERENCE

## *Women and AIDS*

### Quote

When societies are poor and falling apart, there is a lot of sexual violence. And when there is gender inequality, you get a lot of predatory sexual behaviour among men." —Stephen Lewis in *Child View*, Fall 2006

Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft Corporation and one of the leading activists and investors in the global fight against HIV/AIDS, made the opening speech at the 16th International AIDS Conference. In his speech, he said: "We need to put the power to prevent HIV in the hands of women" (August 13, 2006. XVI International AIDS Conference Keynote Speech, [www.gatesfoundation.org/MediaCenter/Speeches/BillgSpeeches/BGSpeech2006AIDS-060813.htm](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/MediaCenter/Speeches/BillgSpeeches/BGSpeech2006AIDS-060813.htm)).

The focus has shifted to women because, in almost all regions of the developing world, more women than men have HIV/AIDS. In Africa alone, out of the 24.5 million people infected with the disease, 13.2 million are women. And almost 70 per cent of the people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa between the ages of 15 and 24 are women.

Why is this so? Dorothy Aken'ova, executive director of the International Centre for Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights, states that many African women have very little control over their own lives. As a girl growing up in Nigeria, she was not allowed to decide what clothes to wear, what company she kept, or what courses to take at school. Her brothers were in charge of monitoring her behaviour and punishing her if she violated any of these expectations. In an August 8, 2006, article in the *Globe and Mail*, Aken'ova explains: "In many places, including northern Nigeria, where I work, tradition and poverty still dictate that girls as young as 12 marry older, sexually experienced men. Across Africa, a woman's right to choose whether and with whom to have

sex is not respected. In South Africa, for instance, 30 per cent of women say their first intercourse was forced, and 71 per cent say they experienced sex against their will."

It is important to acknowledge that women do not have social, political, or economic equality in many parts of the world. This reality means that, in most cases, women in these countries will not be able to get their partners to wear condoms. These women will not, therefore, be able to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS.

It is because women lack social, political, and economic rights that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a US\$62-million fund, is working with doctors and scientists to develop vaginal microbicides and oral prevention drugs to protect women. Vaginal microbicides are gels or creams that can be applied vaginally before sex to block the transmission of the virus. Oral prevention drugs are antiretroviral drugs that are given to prevent infection rather than as treatment. Both of these drugs can be taken by women, without the knowledge or permission of their husbands or partners, in order to protect them from contracting HIV.

Another way to empower women is to provide women who are HIV-positive with drugs to prevent the transmission of the virus to their unborn children. In Canada, virtually no newborns are born HIV-positive because women are screened and, if necessary, treated with this drug during pregnancy. But globally, 70 newborn children an hour are infected with the virus by their mothers. And each hour 45 infants die from AIDS-related causes.



# CANADA HOSTS WORLD AIDS CONFERENCE

## *Children and AIDS*

### Further Research

A new book about African children and AIDS is *Our Stories, Our Songs: African Children Talk About AIDS* by Debra Ellis, Fitzhenry and Whiteside.

The impact that AIDS has had on children has been referred to as “the epidemic within the epidemic.” The epidemic exists not only because of the number of children and youth who already have HIV and AIDS, but because of the number of children and youth who have lost one or both parents to AIDS. UNICEF ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)) estimates there are almost 2.5 million children under 15 living with HIV. In 2005, an estimated 540 000 children under 15 were newly infected with HIV.

### The Situation in Africa

For poor children, HIV is almost certainly a death sentence because of the lack of access to antiretroviral drugs that could prolong their lives. And because they are young, they are confused and frightened by what the future holds for them.

The following story is written by a girl from Namibia. Because it is written in her words, it contains a number of spelling and grammatical errors. Her story demonstrates that children with HIV or AIDS often don’t know how they got the disease, but they do know the disease will likely lead to their death.

“My name is Anna, I am 10 years old living in Namibia. I realized at my very young age that i am HIV positive. I develop lots of skin problem which never heal, and i heard my so called parent talking that i am HIV positive. I am not shock. . . .i don`t know sex i only hear people talking about it. I know even if i die i am going to heaven. My mother passed away in 2000, for HIV related illness, i saw her, when she

was sick, She was very thin and i used to read in different books about this deadly illness. I don`t know who my father is. But i know that both my parents are dead and i have no parent left. I only have my brother from a different father. My life is a disaster, i have my aunty who is looking after me but that is not enough. . . . What i really want is love i want someone who will love me as i suppose to be loved and care for me and my brother. . . .”

Source: Personal stories of young people living with HIV. Available online at AVERT (an international AIDS charity), [www.avert.org/ypstory.htm](http://www.avert.org/ypstory.htm).

AIDS also impacts children in another way—through the loss of one or both parents. In sub-Saharan Africa, UNICEF estimates that about 12.5 million children have lost one or both parents to AIDS. Not surprisingly, these children face a host of challenges, including:

- being forced to leave school to take care of other family members
- having to move to another village, town, or city, to live with other relatives
- living in poverty and lacking sufficient food
- dealing with grief, depression, loneliness, and anxiety
- being discriminated against because they are from a family with someone who has HIV

Unfortunately, statistics also show that children orphaned by AIDS are more susceptible to getting the disease itself. This is particularly true for young women aged 15-24. Unfortunately,

**Did you know . . .**

Data on Canadian AIDS patients aged 10 to 19 indicate that 62% contracted the disease through blood and blood products, 13% through heterosexual contact, 9% through homosexual contact, 9% through injection drug use, 5% through a combination of the latter two, and 2% through their mothers during pregnancy/child-birth.

**Did you know . . .**

At the International AIDS Conference in 2004 children were not on the agenda, and antiretroviral medicines weren't yet being made for children.

orphans become vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. These children have no way to protect themselves against the abuse, and they rarely have any economic means to move to a safer environment.

**The Situation in Canada**

No one knows for sure how many children and teens are living with HIV or AIDS in Canada because public health officials do not break down statistics for 13- to 19-year-olds. But, between 1985 and 2005, over 1 500 young people under the age of 19 were diagnosed with HIV. As of 2005, 666 young Canadians between the ages of 10 to 24 were diagnosed with AIDS.

In some ways, children who contract HIV in Canada and other wealthy nations are fortunate. That is because contracting HIV in a wealthy nation does not necessarily mean you will die of AIDS. Canadians have access to life-saving antiretroviral drugs. As a result, Canadian children who are HIV-positive are living longer.

Life for these children, however, is not easy. They have to take medication, twice a day, for the rest of their lives. Young children begin with liquid medications, move on to pills—sometimes as many as 12 pills a day—and sometimes drugs by injection. Because HIV is adaptable and able to mutate, medication must be taken at the exact same time of the day. If they forget, or sleep in, these children run the risk that the virus will become resistant to some of the drugs. As well, doctors don't yet know the long-term side effects that taking the drugs will have on them.

As the children grow up, the parents are faced with the agonizing decision of when to tell their child that she or he has HIV. Most parents want to protect their children from this knowledge when they are quite young, but want their children to know before they are old enough to become sexually active themselves. Doctors urge parents to tell their children when they are between the ages of 10 and 12.

Once the children have been told they have HIV, then each boy or girl has to decide whether they will tell anyone about their condition or keep the information to themselves. Unfortunately, children and youth who do tell others they have HIV are often shunned by friends, and the information is quickly spread around the child's entire school.

Because children with HIV in Canada can live a long life if they take their medications regularly, we are now seeing the first generation of teens growing up HIV-positive. These teens have to be taught that they have a legal, ethical, and moral duty to tell any potential sexual partner about their HIV status, and that they must always use condoms.

Having HIV adds another layer of complexity to an already awkward period of a teenager's life. These teens are not free to casually hook up with others at parties, and in order to have sex, they have to disclose their status first. This takes a great deal of trust and maturity. Some choose to date others they have met who are HIV-positive, because they believe that only another person infected with the virus will understand them. Others choose to forego sex altogether.

## Analysis

1. Although most young people in Canada who are HIV-positive choose to keep their health status private, Billie Jo Decarie and her family have chosen to speak out. Billie Jo was born HIV-positive and developed AIDS when she was six months old. She got the disease from her mother, Johanne, who was infected through a blood transfusion she received after giving birth to twins in 1985. Billy Jo's father, Bill, also contracted the virus from Johanne. Billie Jo, who is now 17, has talked about the virus with her classmates, given speeches, and raised money for the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. Billie Jo believes that sharing information about HIV and AIDS is an important opportunity to educate people about a topic many are still reluctant to discuss openly.

With a partner, or in a small group, discuss whether or not you think it would be safe for a teenager to disclose their HIV-positive status in your school. Do you think it is true that the news would spread quickly throughout the entire school? How do you think others would treat the student who disclosed the information? What are the benefits of disclosure to both the individual who is HIV-positive and the rest of the school population?

2. According to the UNICEF report *Africa's Orphaned and Vulnerable Generations* there are a number of ways to assist children suffering from HIV or AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Read the following information and then design a poster that incorporates the information you have learned about HIV and children as a way to raise awareness of this issue.

Ways to help African children suffering from HIV or AIDS:

- Help families to protect and care for orphans by providing economic and other support. In Kenya, extended families taking care of orphans now receive a monthly stipend.
- Ensure that orphans have access to education and health care by eliminating school fees and fees for medication.
- Raise awareness and create a supportive environment for children and families affected by the disease so that the stigma associated with AIDS and HIV is reduced.
- Mobilize and support community-based responses so that those with the disease can be cared for in their own communities rather than having to travel long distances and stay in foreign areas for treatment.

# CANADA HOSTS WORLD AIDS CONFERENCE

## *Activity: Canada's AIDS Policy*

On the eve of the 16th International AIDS Conference, held in Canada for the first time, the Public Health Agency of Canada ([www.phac-aspc.gc.ca](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca)) released data to show that 58 000 Canadians were living with the virus. That was up from 50 000 in 2002. This news alone was shocking. After all, most people just assume that because HIV/AIDS has been around for 25 years the number of people contracting the virus would be on the decrease, rather than on the increase. But the news released by the Public Health Agency challenged that assumption. And the news got worse. It seems that 15 000 Canadians (25 per cent) who have the virus don't even know it. Those 15 000 people may engage in casual sex and infect others. They may infect their spouses. They may pass the disease along to their unborn children. And they may share needles with others.

And we are the lucky ones. Because we live in a wealthy nation like Canada we are educated from an early age about the disease and the steps we can take to protect ourselves. Because we live in a wealthy nation, we have access to condoms. Because men and women enjoy equality in Canada, women and girls largely decide if and when they will become sexually active. Because we live in a wealthy nation, if we contract HIV we have access to important antiretroviral medicine that can allow us to live for years and years. But the fact that Canadian transmission rates continue to go up demonstrates that we need to do more to fight HIV/AIDS in this country.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has recently taken two controversial steps regarding AIDS that have been met with considerable criticism. The first is that he refused to attend the 16th International AIDS Conference held in Toronto in August. Dr. Mark Wainberg, co-chair of the conference, said that Harper's absence sent a message that he does not regard HIV/AIDS as a critical priority. Health Minister Tony Clement did attend, however, and he argued that his presence signified the government is committed to fighting the disease. Critics of Harper's believe he refused to attend the conference because he knew he would be criticized for his stance against same-sex marriage. Harper is a conservative who believes that same-sex marriage should not be legal.

Recently, the Harper government was also trying to decide whether or not it would continue to fund a needle-exchange program at a safe-injection site in downtown Vancouver. The program provides free, clean needles to intravenous drug users and provides an on-site nurse. During the last election campaign, Harper said he did not want taxpayers' money used to fund drug use. The program receives \$500 000 a year from Health Canada. Supporters of the program argue that clean needles reduce the transmission of HIV between drug users.

### **Activity**

Your class will be divided into four groups to prepare for two small debates. Two groups will debate whether or not Prime Minister Harper should have attended the conference, despite his opinion on same-sex marriage. Two groups will debate whether or not government money should fund needle-exchange programs. Make sure you include solid examples, statistics, and quotations in your debate points.