

World AIDS Day 2011: The Beginning of the End of AIDS

Annually on December 1, the global community commemorates World AIDS Day by bringing attention to the global epidemic that still infects 2.7 million new people and claims 2 million lives every year. These are sobering numbers, but this year World AIDS Day comes after a string of stunning scientific advances that has fundamentally altered the possibilities in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The end of the AIDS epidemic is within our grasp.

AIDS Treatment is Prevention

In May 2011, researchers announced the results of a breakthrough study known as HPTN 052. This U.S. funded study proved conclusively what AIDS researchers had long suspected: treating HIV-positive people with anti-retroviral therapy (ART) can reduce the risk that they transmit the virus to their uninfected partners. By suppressing the virus, AIDS drugs not only keep people living with HIV/AIDS healthy and alive, they can prevent the virus from being passed on to others. In fact, the study found that when treatment was initiated early in the progression of the disease (as opposed to waiting for the patients to become sick), there was a 96 percent reduction in the risk of transmission.ⁱ

The implications of the study for the future of HIV/AIDS are momentous. We now know that *treatment is prevention*. When used in combination with other prevention strategies, including the prevention of transmission from pregnant mothers to their children, we can turn the tide against HIV/AIDS.

Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS

Tuberculosis, which preys on weakened immune systems, is the leading killer of people with HIV/AIDS. New research by experts at the World Health Organization estimated that with a concerted effort using a combination of strategies to fight TB-HIV co-infection, we can save an additional 1 million lives by 2015.ⁱⁱ

The HPTN 052 study also demonstrated that early AIDS treatment not only reduces transmission of HIV, it can also protect HIV-positive people from opportunistic infections like TB. The study found that early AIDS treatment reduced the occurrence of TB infection by 84 percent.

By starting AIDS treatment earlier, improving the quality and access of TB services, and ensuring people living with HIV/AIDS are tested for TB (and vice versa), we can reduce TB-related AIDS deaths by 80 percent by 2015. That would prevent an additional 1 million deaths.

Investing to End the Epidemic

The implementation of these life-saving strategies will require new financial resources. Recent economic modeling led by researchers at UNAIDS shows that investing more now will actually reduce the cost of the AIDS response in the long run.ⁱⁱⁱ This is common sense - waiting to address a problem can often make it more expensive, and this logic applies to expanding access to AIDS treatment. Increasing global spending by an additional \$5 billion per year by 2015 would not only save lives and prevent new infections, it would make such a dent in the epidemic that the total cost of fighting AIDS would start to fall.

Translating Evidence into Action

Despite this emerging opportunity, global AIDS spending fell in 2010 for the first time in a decade. It is in this context of bold new evidence and wavering political commitment that we approach World AIDS Day 2011. World AIDS Day will be a critical moment to begin to make the case to members of Congress and the White House that U.S. global AIDS policy must continue to follow the evidence.

What makes this World AIDS Day so significant is it will begin the unofficial run-up to the International AIDS Conference, which will be held in Washington, DC in July 2012. The IAC will attract tens of thousands of AIDS researchers, clinicians, activists and people living with the disease. Historically, this biannual conference has served as a key forum to generate global political momentum in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The U.S. has led the way in scaling up treatment so that today 6.6 million people are on therapy. U.S.-funded research has proven that aggressively scaling up treatment can prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and save lives from TB. The United States' top infectious disease expert, Dr. Tony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health, recently wrote that "for the first time in the history of HIV/AIDS, controlling and ending the pandemic are feasible."^{iv} And next summer, the U.S. will host an historic international AIDS conference to bring together evidence and activism to end the epidemic.

ⁱ Cohen, J. et al. Prevention of HIV-1 Infection with Early Antiretroviral Therapy. *New England Journal of Medicine* 2011; 365:493-505.

ⁱⁱ Stop TB Partnership. Time to act: Save a Million lives by 2015; Prevent and treat tuberculosis among people living with HIV. World Health Organization 2011. Available at:

http://www.stoptb.org/assets/documents/resources/publications/acsm/TB_HIV_Brochure_Singles.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schwartlander, B. et al. Towards an improved investment approach for an effective response to HIV/AIDS. *The Lancet*. 2011;377:2031-2041. Available at: [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(11\)60702-2/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(11)60702-2/abstract).

^{iv} Fauci, A. AIDS: Let Science Inform Policy. *Science* 1 July 2011: 13. Available at: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/about/directors/articles/Documents/FauciJuly1.pdf>.