

Adelaide plays host to 'the bigger picture'

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Close to 300 people living with HIV/AIDS, their friends, partners, and service providers converged on Adelaide, South Australia for the 2005 NAPWA Conference.

With the theme 'Our place, your place ... in the bigger picture,' the conference, which took place at the University of Adelaide from 18-20 November, provided a key opportunity to reflect on the place of positive people in the Australian community, Australia's place in a region where HIV numbers are on the rise, and the place of HIV in our lives.

In an unusual twist, one of the highlights of the weekend was a part of the program most of us have come to accept as routine. For the first time, the welcome to land by the traditional owners was conducted by an openly HIV-positive person. Rodney Junga-Williams, an elder of the Kaurna people, drew a moving comparison between the experience of Indigenous people and those living with HIV/AIDS. "We are all wounded warriors," he told the crowd, "and in some way, you are all warriors as well."

Keynote speaker Ian Grubb, an expatriate Australian AIDS activist who now works as policy adviser to the World Health Organisation's HIV/ AIDS program, compared his own good health and survival with HIV/AIDS to the plight of the majority of people living with HIV/AIDS who have no access to treatment.

"While I feel immensely fortunate to have had reasonably good treatment and care for nearly a decade now, I'm reminded constantly in my current work that my own good fortune is little more than an accident of birth," he said.

Grubb gave an outline of the development of the WHO's ambitious '3 by 5' plan, and the obstacles faced in expanding treatment access to the developing world. Despite his employer's longstanding involvement in HIV/AIDS policy, Grubb confided that, as far as he knows, he is the first openly HIV-positive person to work at the WHO

As in Cairns two years ago, the opening afternoon was devoted to an informal gathering with exhibitions, stalls, video presentations and a musical performance by Tim Bishop and Sam Barsah. During the afternoon and at social functions including a welcome reception and community barbecue, delegates met up with old friends and forged new networks.

The conference also saw the launch of the revised version of NAPWA's landmark Declaration of Rights for People Living with HIV/AIDS. Originally drafted in 1993, the Declaration asserts the legal and human rights of positive people in a range of areas including access to treatment, freedom from discrimination and the right to be involved in the response to HIV/AIDS.

Launching the updated Declaration, prominent barrister and long-time AIDS advocate David Buchanan, SC, acknowledged that rights and responsibilities go hand in hand, and argued that if people living with HIV/AIDS were expected to act responsibly to help contain their infection, their rights must be respected.

"It's all about respect," said Buchanan. "If you respect me and show that you respect me, the chances are that I will show respect for you. People living with HIV/AIDS don't need sermons about avoiding harm to others. The perception that positive people are in need of laws criminalising disease transmission tells us more about the stigma attaching to HIV than about actual disease transmission risk.

"At the end of the day, if the State, if people in groups and if people as individuals take a social justice approach to people with HIV/AIDS, then a reduction in disease transmission will be but one of the social and public health benefits which ensue.

"It's all part of the package."

The conference program included workshops and presentations focusing on issues of importance to positive people including disclosure, care and support, activism and prevention. Targeted workshops were held for positive women, heterosexuals and treatment officers.

Australia's increasingly important role in assisting the response to HIV/ AIDS in our region also received significant attention. A group of positive people from Papua New Guinea once again attended the conference and, for the first time, a small group from Timor-Leste. NAPWA's work in building capacity in these countries was highlighted in a session on international issues.

The conference concluded on Sunday afternoon with a final musical performance and the unveiling of a quilt panel produced during the one-day women's satellite meeting which preceded the conference (see *In Focus*, page 12).

As delegates departed for the airport, we remembered the words with which Rodney Junga-Williams welcomed us to Adelaide: "I want you to know that you're all warriors, and you simply being here – how brave that is."

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