

World AIDS Day: twenty years on

Created 25 Nov 2008 - 11:10am

It is the 20th anniversary of World AIDS Day commemorations as the HIV community gets ready for a range of activities and gatherings in the week leading up to December 1 (now called World AIDS Awareness Week) to remember those we have lost to the [virus](#) [1]A small infective organism which is incapable of reproducing outside a host cell. and to recognise the impact it is still having on millions around the world, including in Australia.

The concept of a World AIDS Day began in 1988 when a meeting of health ministers from around the world agreed it presented an opportunity for everyone to come together to demonstrate the importance of HIV/AIDS and show solidarity for the cause.

This year's world theme is "Leadership: Stop AIDS. Keep the Promise" but NAPWA representative on the Australian World AIDS Day Reference Group, Katherine Leane said it was decided that this theme was particularly related to the promises around global access to treatments (less of an issue here) and that Australia's message would be "Enjoy Life. Take Control. Stop HIV/AIDS". This will feature on T-shirts and posters that the committee is distributing nationally for the week. The traditional metal red ribbon is also available.

Message for HIV-positive people

'It's a message that is trying to strike a balance about people not being overly fearful of HIV and those with it but that "prevention is everyone's business" (following on with last year's message) and this involves responsible behaviour by all. While this is aimed at the mainstream Australian community, the message I think HIV- positive people can take from this is how important it is to take control of your health and wellbeing.'

Katherine Leane has been involved with the Reference Group here for many years and laments the difficult task the committee has running a national awareness campaign with a total budget of \$150 000. 'An effective campaign needs to clearly define target groups as part of a strategic planning process. This year's target group is supposed to be 18- 35 year-olds and it was hoped to build an interactive website to involve this age group in particular but unfortunately that hasn't come to fruition. I am also disappointed that once again the committee is not allowed to distribute male and female condoms as a part of the resources we give out. This has always seemed incongruous to me.'

Time for reflection

Long time HIV-positive national and international activist, Susan Paxton reflected on the significance of the Day for her over the years. 'World AIDS Day (WAD) is always a special day for me though it has changed enormously in the last two decades. It is a time to remind the world about HIV, and a time to remember. I am so grateful that many of us have access to ARVs now and can look forward to long and healthy lives, but it doesn't change the fact that many people do not get easy access to these drugs. It doesn't make it any easier remembering the many friends I have lost to AIDS in Australia, Asia and Africa before the drugs were available.

'There are several World AIDS Days that I remember vividly – in the mid-90s I organised WAD events for the Victorian AIDS Council – with Carmen Lawrence (then Federal Health Minister) and Winnie Chikafumbwa from Malawi speaking in the City Square; another year I got red ribbons on many of the buildings in Melbourne, including St Paul's Cathedral and the Town Hall, and had women abseiling from its balcony. Another WAD I was in Papua New Guinea and was asked to address a rally at the university. I consciously chose WAD as the day I handed in my PhD thesis in 2000, and as the day I graduated the following year.'

President of NAPWA, Robert Mitchell has been HIV- positive for fifteen years and involved with HIV community organisations for much of that time. 'For me it is a time for reflection, a time when I remember the many friends that have died, but also those who are still fighting the virus. It reminds me how fortunate I am to have my good health. It is the time of the year when I think about the achievements we have made for the positive community and also what more we could do to help others affected by the virus. I wish I didn't have HIV, but I do, so I have to

make the most of my life as an HIV- positive person.'

Candlelight Vigil: 25 years

This year also sees the 25th Anniversary of AIDS Candlelight Vigil ceremonies. The first vigil was an impromptu march by a group of gay men in San Francisco on May 2 1983. It took a route from Castro down Market Streets to the Town Hall that gay rights activists had used to protest the death of Harvey Milk several years prior. Its impetus, according to website accounts by survivors, was to try to change the inaction of the government, the indifference of the media and a hostile and homophobic public. The men carried candles in memory of those who had already died and along the way hundreds joined in as a show of support.

Before the end of 1983 memorial marches and ceremonies were held across the US and a 25-year tradition began. Colin Krycer, who has organised Candlelight Vigil and AIDS Quilt ceremonies in Melbourne for many years said that the date for Candlelight Vigils in Australia changed from the international day in May to coincide with World AIDS Day ceremonies on December 1. 'In Melbourne we made the change to summer in 1996 because of bad weather often in May and we didn't want people to catch nasty colds walking in the rain. Around the country the Vigil and AIDS Quilt presentations all seem to have coalesced into one, partly through convenience.'

It is also 20 years since the Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt Project was launched on World AIDS Day in 1988 by Ita Buttrose. Australia has the second largest collection of panels, tributes to lost friends, lovers and family members, outside of the US.

- [World AIDS Day](#)

Links:

[1] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/125>