

## Chapter 20

### **Behavioural change to reduce the risk of HIV infection: comments from a donor's perspective**

**Per Bolme**

*Sida/SAREC, S-105 25 Stockholm, Sweden*

This conference in April 1999 represented the last of a series of meetings held by the four African research teams representing three countries: Nigeria, Ghana and Uganda. The research was co-ordinated by John Caldwell and his group in Canberra, Australia. SAREC invited the researchers in 1991 to write an application for research, and the first grant was approved for a two-year period, with the prospect of continued support if the research was successful. Since then, conferences have been held on a yearly basis in each of the participating countries. The conferences have served several purposes. They have been a part of the progress of the research through discussions both by the research team itself and by invited key persons. They also served the purpose of informing the National AIDS Programs in the host countries of ongoing activities and certainly served as an inspiration to actions within the National programs. Since SAREC has always been represented at those conferences, the donor has also been able to influence the focus of the research to some extent, but above all the conferences have served as tools of knowledge transfer, from the researchers to SAREC, which has helped in its policy work. Since SAREC is an agency with the primary goal of supporting research, including basic research, the work has been carried on with the scientific aspect always in focus, and without the time restraint which usually occurs when NGOs and other donors support more action-oriented projects. It was important that baseline studies could be carried out and that methods could be evaluated before the result-focused intervention studies were performed.

From the donor's perspective, this project has been very successful and resulted in several publications and, above all, it has inspired other researchers in the field. Therefore, the present conference was also meant to bring other researchers in the field of social and behavioural research about HIV/AIDS to Canberra and it was decided to have a focus of the epidemic on Africa and in Asia. It proved to be very fruitful and, as presented elsewhere in this volume, a real exchange of new knowledge took place between the research groups with an African perspective and those who work in South and Southeast Asia.

A vivid discussion took place during the last day of the conference and one discussion subject was which interventions were needed to help bring the epidemic under control. First it was stated by John Caldwell that research and its publication in itself is an intervention. It was further stated that all interventions, in order to be successful, ought to be worked out in close contact with representatives of the group to be studied. Ethical considerations must always be taken into account and the local or national authorities must both be involved when the intervention is planned and later be informed about results achieved. The reasons behind success or failure to control the epidemic were also discussed. It has been said that both the economic status and what has been called the social coherence of a population are important determinants when it comes to controlling the HIV epidemic.

Therefore, the involvement of political and religious leaders is of the utmost importance. More and more nations have realized that HIV/AIDS is more than a health problem, and preferably the battle against the epidemic should be co-ordinated at the highest political levels, such as the Prime Minister's office, or by planning or finance ministries. If the political leaders or the religious leaders fail to lead the fight against HIV/AIDS, many countries are going to see even higher prevalence figures for HIV than today's. Above all, the silence about HIV/AIDS must be broken once and for all.

During this conference reports were given of the mobilization against HIV that the homosexual community performed in Australia with great success. This shows that it is possible to change sexual behaviour if the knowledge is present, and in this case both the economic situation and the social coherence in that community worked in favour of the control of the situation. Even if it is difficult to make comparisons between a situation in a Western highly educated and informed community and a poor African or Asian society where knowledge is often lacking, the mere fact that changes in sexual behaviour are possible and can come about quickly, if the people involved understand why, gives hope for the future.

Finally, it was a general opinion of the conference participants that even if an effective vaccine against HIV comes soon, the need for social and behavioural research in the field of HIV/AIDS will not diminish. It is also very important that conferences and meetings dealing with HIV/AIDS have a multidisciplinary approach, and that field workers and decision makers become exposed to research results and have a chance to make an input into the research from their knowledge about the realities of this terrible epidemic of HIV.