

Jose M Gatell, Conference Co-Chair: Conference Closing Speech

Introduction

Welcome to the closing ceremony of the XIV International AIDS Conference (IAC). After a long and hopefully fruitful week it is now time to wrap up, to say goodbye, to welcome the Thai delegation and most importantly to open a period of 2 years of very hard work.

It has been a great honour to organise it on behalf of IAS and in close co-operation with co-organisers (UNAIDS ICASO, ICW, GNP+ and Red, 2002).

The IAC has gathered more than 17.000 delegates including 2500 recipients of scholarships and/or free registrations and 1.300 journalists. All these figures are the highest ever. More important than total number are some illustrative examples: 100 delegates from Botswana, 688 from South Africa, 348 from India, 116 from China, 335 from Thailand, 414 from Brazil, 56 from Dominican Republic and 250 from former Soviet Republics and Russia, to just mention a few examples. These countries are also well represented in the distribution of the 8.000 accepted abstracts.

One of the milestones of this IAC most likely will be the participation of a large number of committed world leaders. Eleven presidents or prime ministers and 40 health ministers have participate in the debates.

It is time to listen to the advice, recommendations and conclusions of these top political leaders and particularly to those who yesterday convened in a debate session.

It is also time to request them to listen to our concerns, wishes, disappointments and anger and to endorse them and react accordingly and soon.

It is also time to listen IAS incoming president.

It is also time to unmask the faces of those who have made the conference possible.

Finally, it is also time to listen to the voice of the community, affected people and activists. This is going to be the program for the next hour or so.

We hope that the legacy of the Conference be a solid and permanent partnership between scientists, community and social and political leaders, in order to translate the knowledge and science into action and to do it now.

Staff of the Conference Secretariat

The visible faces of the Conference are the Chairs, Organisers, the co-Organisers, the delegates and obviously the media. The staff is the invisible face and IT the people the virtual face if you wish. The more they remain invisible the more everything proceeds smoothly.

The staff including Congrex and T-Systems is a group of more than 40 persons from 10 different countries, including Africa, America, Asia and Europe. They have been extraordinarily committed with the Conference, and working very hard for a long period of time, from 6 months to near 4 years. During the preparation of the Conference they had been working not only hard, but also quite often under stressful and difficult conditions for a variety of reasons.

Some have had past experience with International AIDS Conferences. Others like myself and Jordi or Pat was the first time and trust me, at least for myself it will be the last time as well. By the way, more than 2/3 are women and most likely this is the reason why almost every thing was running smoothly.

In addition, during the Conference more than 1.000 additional persons mainly volunteers, but also AV staff, hostesses, personal from Fira and Palau Sant Jordi, and Comediants, among others have been working for all of us.

It is up to you to decide whether or not this XIV IAC has been successful in terms of its organisation. In any case, I assume all weaknesses and mistakes, and all credits and strengths should be attributed to them.

I am now requesting them to come to the stage and please dear friends joint me in congratulating this extraordinary group of people.

Final Remarks

We are approaching the end of a very busy and hopefully very fruitful and productive week. My role during this week has been to co-chair this big event, the biggest in the whole series of IAC and hopefully also will represent a new milestone in our fight against the epidemic.

In real life however I am a simple clinician who is very proud of taking care and treating individual patients. And, to be totally honest I would had never dream to address the final remarks of an IAC to such a huge and committed and multidisciplinary audience sharing the stage with such big personalities. So let me first of all behave as a simple clinician making some conclusions about the Conference. Among other things, I have learned that 1) Once a person became infected, the virus will remain for life, 2) I have learned that the virus is bad for everybody, everywhere and in any stage of the HIV disease and this is particularly true in advanced patients. 3) I have learned that therapy can be very simple and relatively well tolerated and able to be directly observed and monitored with very simple and quick laboratory tests. 4) I have learned that already now or relatively soon we will have additional and completely new families of medicines and maybe even a therapeutic vaccine opening a future possibility that therapy may not be even needed for life.

During the four years of the preparation of this Conference and particularly during this week I have also learned that this is not enough by far. So please allow me to reshape some of these conclusions. Prevention still is the main priority every where and possibly requires a great deal of commitment, action and only a reasonable amount of money. But ladies and gentleman prevention and therapy are no longer a dichotomy. They are complementary and should be implemented together and everywhere. Let me also reshape the message of simplification therapy by saying that simple and well tolerated therapies will facilitate enormously its implementation in resource poor settings. And let me also reinforce, as a number of plenary speakers already did, that access to live saving medicines is not a gift or a commodity but a basic human right, in fact one of the most basic human rights.

The discussions, advises and recommendations of the XIV IAC endorsed by many world leaders who has participated in the debates and sessions and amplified by the broad media coverage should be a clean and a irreversible message to all public and private agencies about prevention, about a simple and affordable antiretroviral therapy and health care for every person who needs it and, in summary, about a respect and empowerment for basic human rights.

Again, let me reinforce dear friends, that the Conference is not an objective by itself. The real challenge is an effective and successful fight against the AIDS epidemic during the forthcoming months and years. Please don't wait until the next Conference in Thailand. So, please when you get back home after this week of hard work, work even harder to implement and disseminate the Conference messages. Convince your local leaders to endorse them. Please, start translating the knowledge and the commitment into action.

Thanks for having been in Barcelona and I hope you have enjoyed your stay among us.
Goodbye, Adios, Adeu ...