

IAS Conference opens with spotlight on politics

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The 4th International AIDS Society (IAS) Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention has opened in Sydney with calls for increased funding for HIV research, and a powerful rejection of the Australian Prime Minister's plans to tighten restrictions on immigration by people living with HIV/AIDS.

More than 6000 people are attending the conference, which is being held in Australia - and the Asia-Pacific region - for the first time. While previous IAS Conferences have focused almost exclusively on medical research and [clinical](#) [1]Pertaining to or founded on observation and treatment of participants, as distinguished from theoretical or basic science. care, speakers at the opening of the conference on Sunday evening repeatedly referred to the contentious plans by the federal government to further restrict HIV immigration. While Australia's long-standing partnership between government, researchers and affected communities was applauded at the opening, speakers warned that the partnership was threatened by recent political developments.

"Recent comments by high governmental authorities have cast doubt on Australia's commitment to reduce stigma and discrimination for people living with HIV," said IAS president Pedro Cahn. "Fortunately, neither the scientific community nor the Australian people support these statements. We stand united with local and global AIDS community to ensure that people living with HIV have the right to travel without harassment or the requirement to disclose their HIV status."

Professor David Cooper, of Australia's National Centre in HIV [Epidemiology](#) [2]The branch of medical science that deals with the study of incidence and distribution and control of a disease in a population. and Clinical Research ([3]National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research. Based at the University of NSW in Sydney, NCHECR is one of Australia's leading medical research centres and is recognised internationally as a leader in the field of research into HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis.), described Australia's partnership response to HIV as "something to be proud of and a partnership worth not just saving, but actively nurturing." But he warned that recent rises in HIV infections meant the partnership was in danger of fragmenting due to the politicisation of the issue. "Pointing fingers of blame will do nothing to curtail infections," he told the crowd. "Threatening to demonise people living with HIV infection will not help. Making recent immigrants from developing countries the alleged culprits will not help."

Federal health minister Tony Abbott, noted that there are no restrictions on HIV-positive people coming to Australia on tourist visas, and indicated that there was no intent to change this. But for people seeking permanent residency, he confirmed the government's intentions to implement new restrictions. Describing Australia as a "big-hearted and compassionate country," Abbott said that applicants for permanent residency will have to give "enforceable undertakings" to seek treatment. "But this is because we want to help people, not judge them," he said. "This is because we want to treat people, not quarantine them."

Maura Mea, an HIV-positive woman from Papua New Guinea, reminded the audience of the importance of maintaining a strong involvement by people living with HIV/AIDS in the response to the epidemic, in our region and globally. "One of the keys to addressing the HIV epidemic is to address stigma and discrimination," she said. "An important way of doing this is to put a real human face to the epidemic and embrace the principles of Greater Involvement of Positive People (GIPA) in decisions that affect their lives. Those principles are as important today as they were when they were first developed in 1994."

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Links:

[1] <http://napwa.org.au/glossary/term/475>

[2] <http://napwa.org.au/glossary/term/490>

[3] <http://napwa.org.au/glossary/term/408>