Encouraging signs

Created *15 Aug 2004 - 6:00am*

After the last International AIDS Conference, held in Barcelona in 2002, I felt profoundly depressed. It just seemed to me that globally a very small amount of progress had been made in a fight against a problem that had got much worse. Furthermore there was little I could point to that suggested things were really going to change.

Two years later, in Bangkok, even though there was little comforting medical news (no new drugs other than those we already knew about, vaccines years away if ever, but some encouraging work on microbicides), it seems that something has changed.

There seems to be more of a recognition of the seriousness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and more of a will to do something about it. Yes, there are concerns about the World Health Organisation's 'Three by Five' initiative being behind schedule, and worries that the Global Fund will be under-funded. There is considerable resentment at the excessive pricing policies of big pharma and the constraints placed on the US Presidents' Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the American overemphasis on abstinence. There was the perceived affront to positive people at the opening ceremony.

But despite all of that, there are many things happening, treatment is slowly getting to the people who need it, money is flowing a bit more, and in the Asia-Pacific there is a recognition that we have a big problem to face. Sonia Ghandi assured the world that India is taking the epidemic there seriously. We hope she is right.

I was left with the feeling that the battle for recognition and allocation of resources is on the way to being won. Now part of the focus switches to implementation, underlining the tremendous amount of work that needs to be done.

One wonders whether the money for this conference might have been spent in better ways, but at least it briefly put the issue on the front pages.

The second Asia-Pacific PLWHA Congress was organised for the day before the conference and was a follow up from the first one held in Bangkok in January 2004. All positive people attending the conference were invited to attend. There were about 100 people from some 24 Asia Pacific countries, including an impressive contingent of six Australians.

The main work of the day was to discuss the "Bangkok Declaration" issued formally on July 13.

The Declaration covers three areas: Policy and Decision Making, Access to Treatment and Support Services, and Social and Economic Empowerment. Three working groups were formed to work on priority outcomes and key support activities required in the three corresponding areas of Treatment, Human Rights, and Greater Involvement of People with HIV/AIDS. Some priorities were identified for the Asia-Pacific PLWHA Resource Centre, based in New Delhi, to work on.

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- HIV in our region
- involvement of positive people

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