

Global AIDS is out-of-control

by Rex Wockner

Part 2 of 2

Wockner's wrap-up report from the 2002 International AIDS Conference held in Barcelona Spain.

HIV Transmission

The study on infection rates in young U.S. gays was conducted by the Centers for Disease Control at gay bars and other meeting places in several cities. They interviewed 5719 men under age 30 then drew their blood. Five hundred seventy-three of the men tested positive and 440 of them didn't know they were positive. Most, in fact, thought they were negative and at low-risk for HIV infection. Ninety-one percent of the blacks who were positive didn't know it, 70 percent of the Latinos and 60 percent of the whites.

A spokesman for the D.C.-based national lobby/policy group AIDS Action said a big part of the problem is barebacking — gay men deliberately not using condoms during casual sexual encounters.

"There is the whole notion that AIDS is over in the United States, that it's not a problem any more," Director of Public Policy Scott Brawley said in an interview.

"Prevention messages are not working. We do have gay men barebacking. ... We have a whole generation of people under the age of 30 that don't remember the AIDS epidemic, that think it's nothing more than, 'Hell, you take a couple of pills and you'll be fine.'"

Brawley had no suggestions on how to slow the barebacking trend.

"My honest response, as a gay man, is that

things are going to have to get worse again before they'll ever get better," he said. "Resistant HIV, an explosion of HIV, something that may go wrong with the medications."

Treatment

The new drug — an entry/fusion inhibitor made by Roche and the U.S. biotech firm Trimeris — is called T-20 or enfuvirtide. It has succeeded in reducing HIV viral load to undetectable levels in many people who had become resistant to all currently available drugs, which are protease inhibitors or reverse-transcriptase inhibitors. T-20 will be shockingly expensive (\$10,000-\$12,000 per patient per year, according to reports) and must be injected rather than swallowed.

Still, veteran AIDS researcher Robert Gallo, who co-discovered HIV, predicted that fusion/entry inhibitors like T-20 soon will replace protease inhibitors because the latter are "toxic."

"The inhibitors of viral entry will be the most important new advances," Gallo said. "The protease inhibitors will go down and

maybe go away. Important as they are, they are toxic. ... My guess would be in two or three years, the protease inhibitors will go away. They will be taken over by viral entry inhibitors and by more intelligent use of reverse-transcriptase inhibitors."

Human trials will begin this year in the U.S. and Italy on another possible new treatment — therapeutic vaccines.

The vaccines, which are rubbed into the skin, may allow HIV-positive people to periodically go off their meds, or to take fewer drugs, researchers said. The vaccines work in monkeys, stimulating the white blood cells that destroy HIV-infected cells.

At the conference's closing session, Bill Clinton repeated his recipe for ending the AIDS epidemic and former South African President Nelson Mandela, honorary co-chair of the International AIDS Trust, presented a lengthy analysis of the crisis, agreeing with Clinton almost point-by-point.

"AIDS is a war against humanity," Mandela said. "This is a war which requires total



Demonstrators at the Barcelona 2002 AIDS Conference wave signs asking for the \$10 billion for People With AIDS in disease-ravaged countries.

mobilization of entire populations. We must find ways and means to make lifesaving treatment available to all who need it regardless of whether they can pay for it or where they live or for any other reason why treatment is denied."

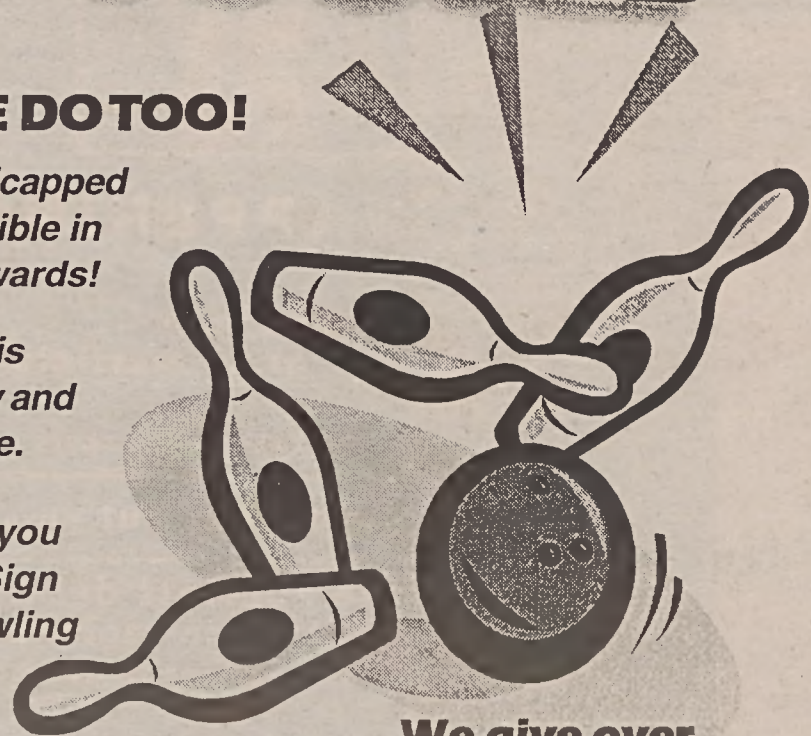
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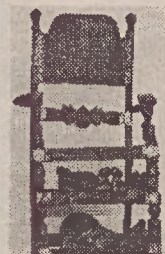
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