

UNAIDS Address
Opening Ceremony
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by
Catherine Hankins MD MSc FRCPC
Associate Director (designate), Strategic Information, UNAIDS

Good afternoon friends, colleagues and honoured guests.

UNAIDS has always been a strong supporter of this annual forum and is very pleased to cosponsor this 13th International Conference on Drug Related Harm in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The International Harm Reduction Association is a valued partner of UNAIDS, as are the regional harm reduction networks, and we have set up an office in Vienna focused on partnering with other UN agencies to strengthen the HIV component of their programmes.

First of all, let me make it clear from the outset that, to reduce the health and social consequences of drug use, the United Nations fully endorses the fundamental principles of harm reduction: reaching out to injecting drug users, providing sterile injecting equipment and disinfectant materials, and providing substitution treatment.

In much of the world, the translation of well-accepted harm reduction theory into harm reduction reality is held back by lack of social and political will. More than 15 years after the first case of AIDS in an injecting drug user was documented, this lack of political leadership, this political reticence, creates a gap between the urgent need to act and actually doing what we know works. This gap concerns all of us who observe rising levels of injection drug use and of HIV among injecting drug users in developing countries and transitional nations. This gap concerns all of us who recognise, as Secretary General Kofi Annan has stated, that ‘each of us is fully worthy of the respect and dignity essential to our common humanity’.

There are successes to build on – and we will hear about many of them over the next few days. With strong national responses, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia are keeping the HIV epidemic among drug users at bay. China has announced the establishment of its first methadone substitution programme. More than 150 HIV prevention projects among injection drug users have been set up in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. However, this region has the fastest growing HIV epidemic in the world and it is now estimated that over 1 million people are infected.

Dual epidemics are at play – the epidemic of injection drug use and the HIV epidemic. An estimated 1% of the population in the Russian Federation and other parts of the former Soviet Union is now injecting drugs. Male-female ratios among HIV cases are falling as increasing numbers of young women take up drug use and become infected by HIV and as heterosexual transmission gives HIV a toe-hold in the

general population. The Ukraine now has an adult HIV prevalence of 1%, the highest in the region.

The threat of a much larger and more generalised epidemic across the region is very real. However, the epidemic is at an early stage. Investment in massive prevention efforts now will reap huge dividends. What is needed is a bold, comprehensive response to reduce risky sexual and drug-injecting behaviour among young people and to tackle the socioeconomic and other factors that are promoting the spread of the virus.

All of our governments, in June 2001 at the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in New York, signed on to a new framework for national and international accountability in the struggle against HIV. All of our governments pledged, among other things, to establish by 2003 national prevention targets for identifiable groups with high or increasing rates of infection and to ensure that by 2005 a wide range of prevention programmes are available, including expanded access to sterile injecting equipment and harm reduction efforts related to drug use.

It is our role to hold our governments to their promises. It is our role to emphasise that there is no 'one size fits all' solution and that a range of responses is required, not only focused on demand reduction, supply reduction and harm reduction but also on policy and legal reform, on modified application of laws that are impeding our prevention efforts and on reduction of the stigma and discrimination that isolate and marginalise drug users, stripping them of their human dignity.

Let us learn new strategies and share successes and set-backs, but above all, let us come away from this conference, whether we are involved in participatory outreach and community development programmes, running prevention projects, providing treatment, promoting policy change, or able to move the agenda forward in other ways - let us all come away from this conference with a renewed commitment to advocating for a combination of strategies that can make a difference to the lives of millions of injection drug users around the world at risk of HIV.

Thank you for your attention.