



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**PROOF**

**MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST**

**Ninth International Congress  
on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 9 September 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

**Date** Wednesday, 9 September 2009  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Moore, Sen Claire

**Source** Senate  
**Proof** Yes  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Senator MOORE** (Queensland) (12.45 pm)—Last month I attended the Ninth International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, which was held from 9th to 13th August in Nusa Dua, Bali, in Indonesia. More than 4,000 delegates from across the region and other parts of the world came together at that conference, whose theme was ‘Empowering people, strengthening networks’. The conference was officially opened by the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Dr Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. This was the ninth international conference. The inaugural event was held here in Canberra in 1990. In fact Australia is the only place that has hosted more than one of these conferences, also hosting a conference later in Melbourne. The next conference is going to be in Korea.

I attended in my capacity as Chair of the Parliamentary Group on Population and Development. The Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development, of which our group is a member, worked in collaboration with UNAIDS to support 20 parliamentarians from across the Asia-Pacific to attend this conference and to participate in two major panel discussion events. My parliamentary colleagues attending included my good friend Dame Carol Kidu, Minister for Community Development from Papua New Guinea; Francesca Semoso, Deputy Speaker from the Bougainville Autonomous Government; the Minister for Health from Samoa; and parliamentarians from Pakistan, Malaysia and the Cook Islands.

The conference had a noble goal and vision. It talks a little bit in the UN speak but I will give you the vision. The vision of the conference was:

A vibrant community of empowered people, linked by strong networks that reach across Asia and the Pacific and beyond to mobilize a holistic and effective response, based on the latest best practices and scientific evidence, to the specific and cross-border challenges of the HIV pandemic faced by countries in the region today.

As a result of this quite noble vision, we also had a goal, which was:

To promote scientific excellence and inquiry, provide a forum for meaningful dialogue, foster accountability, and encourage individual and collective action for addressing HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific and ensure the sustainability of the response.

The conference opening included calls for strength and commitment to achieving universal access to HIV-AIDS prevention and treatment. They linked back to the UN process and, as so often in this area, we were focused on the Millennium Development Goals. We speak often of those goals in this place but we need to make them a dynamic, active process rather than just rhetoric. In one of his statements the UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibe said:

We must transform the AIDS response in Asia so that it works for people—people who have been marginalized and without a voice.

This means protecting sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender drug users and their intimate partners.

A key element of the process was to have a meeting of the AIDS ambassadors from across the region, one of whom was our AIDS Ambassador, and the AusAID Deputy Director-General, Murray Proctor. He had a leading role in this conference and was involved in many of the sessions, being part of a keynote plenary. Indeed one of the things that was most encouraging and which made me very proud attending this conference was the high calibre of the Australian participation and also the deep respect with which Australia was held by so many people attending the conference. In fact it was wonderful to walk through many of the demonstration areas and see so many Australians who were there in their capacity as researchers and people who work in the AIDS network, and to see the way their knowledge and their skills were being deeply respected by people from across the world.

Mr Murray Proctor in his plenary session linked again Australia’s aid response to our commitment to the MDGs. Throughout the conference there was a theme around the MDGs. The theme was: ‘1+2+3=6’, referring to the MDGs. As we all know, MDG 1 refers to poverty, MDG 2 refers to access to education and MDG 3 refers to genuine gender equality. So the process is: we could work together to build this.

Mr Proctor came up with one that I deeply support: ‘4+5 is greater than 6’. That seemed to me to be linking back to so much of the work that we do in this place. MDG 4 refers to child mortality and MDG 5 refers to maternal and child health. So as we know, the specific MDG looking at the issues around HIV and diseases is No. 6. So the theme, the process and the involvement

were very much linked to an international commitment to the MDGs.

It was an extremely vibrant and colourful conference. There were 150 presentations in five plenary sessions, three keynote speeches, 24 symposia, 31 skill-building sessions, 339 oral presentations and 1,122 poster sessions. The poster sessions involved people from a wide range of organisations coming along and displaying posters that showed the work they did. To see the pride with which people came and talked about the work that they were doing in their local communities, whether from a small Pacific country or somewhere in Scandinavia, or in Australia with our own AusAID presentations, was impressive.

The way the conference operated really showed that there was deep government commitment to the processes, which is so important. The Indonesian first lady, who is one of Indonesia's key AIDS ambassadors, Her Excellency Ani Bambang Yudhoyono, and other AIDS ambassadors urged nations to work towards implementing the declaration of commitment adopted at the UN General Assembly special session on AIDS in 2001 and the following political declaration in 2006. This was being recommitted in the midst of the pressures of the global economic crisis. As so much of AIDS funding comes from charitable trusts and donations from across the world, the conference looked at how we could maintain the necessary effort in the midst of this tightened economic crisis.

Key presentations recognised the need to scale up HIV prevention for men who have sex with men and sex workers; the increasing feminisation of HIV-AIDS across the planet, particularly in the Asia-Pacific area; the role of civil society; the fear of increasing HIV epidemics in Papua New Guinea and the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua; and the need for sexual and reproductive health activities to be completely integrated into HIV-AIDS policies and programs.

We know there are more than five million people currently living with HIV-AIDS in the Asia-Pacific region. Approximately nine million people have been infected with HIV and more than 380,000 new infections are estimated to occur every year. The region has witnessed more than 2.6 million men, over 950,000 women and almost 330,000 children die of AIDS related diseases since this virus was identified 20 years ago.

In the Pacific, epidemics are relatively small, except for in Papua New Guinea, where the number of people living with HIV increased from 10,000 in 2001 to 54,000 in 2007. The evidence indicates that, within the Pacific, HIV-AIDS is predominantly spread

through unsafe heterosexual intercourse. People are still confronted by that. We seem to have in our minds a view of what this issue is about, but we still have not clearly understood that in 2009 those horrific statistics I just read out show that the spread of AIDS in our community is mainly through unsafe heterosexual intercourse.

The parliamentary panels, which included parliamentarians from across the areas through the sponsorship of the parliamentary groups on population and development, naturally talked mostly about reproductive health. As the feminisation of AIDS moves the epidemic into the domain of sexual and reproductive health, our challenge must be to integrate HIV-AIDS knowledge and research with sexual and reproductive health. HIV-AIDS across the world has become almost unique in its ability to mobilise support and funding. There is a general awareness of the seriousness of this epidemic and, although some of the issues relating to HIV-AIDS are contentious—and I will not go into my concerns about the Vatican's statements—funding commitments remain strong for this issue. However, this is not always the case for sexual and reproductive health.

The value of approaching the spread of HIV through a sexual and reproductive health framework is evident as the disease spreads increasingly to women and young adults. At the same time, the advantages provided by the strong funding base for HIV could well be integrated into a broader sexual and reproductive health approach, having the effect of providing extra funding for causes such as maternal deaths, unsafe abortions, unwanted pregnancies and the massive spread of sexually transmitted diseases across our area of the world.

HIV-AIDS has become undeniably a matter of sexual and reproductive health. Women's rights are an end in themselves, and every woman deserves to live in good health and free from disease. This statement alone should be compelling enough to push us to act to improve the status of women and girls in our area and in the world generally.

We talked with people from the Australian delegations at this conference and we met with people from the HIV Consortium for Partnerships in Asia and the Pacific, which has visited this building a number of times. The HIV consortium is a collaboration of nine Australian HIV organisations. It was formed to foster strategic partnerships and linkages between Australia and the Asia and Pacific regions. The organisations who are members of this consortium seek to develop long-term relationships with counterpart organisations. This spills across the whole of our region so that we can, through our combined knowledge and strength, put up a stronger fight to face up to the challenges

of HIV. The overarching goal of the program is to strengthen the role of organisations and individuals in the Asia and Pacific regions to contribute to the effective responses to HIV.

A number of strong, independent research and industry groups with HIV knowledge in Australia are part of this consortium. They had a high profile at the conference. They talked about further building their knowledge and funding base to increase awareness of what the issues are in our country.

AusAID, which was a sponsor of the conference, took strong leadership at the conference. Consistently in all of the programs we saw the Australian government crest reinforcing to all 4,000 delegates that our government has a positive view about where we are moving in this area. Minister Smith had in April this year launched a new AusAID strategy entitled 'Intensifying the Response: Halting the Spread of HIV: Australia's International Development Strategy for HIV'. This strategy looks at the rapidly escalating rate of HIV infection amongst men who have sex with men in all major cities in Asia, which is becoming a major driver of expanding epidemics in the region.

It also looks at the necessity of having appropriate access to drugs in the area. Some of the more devastating statements made at the conference were about the availability of drugs. We saw that, for a relatively small monetary investment, drugs could be provided across the whole of the Asia-Pacific region. This could save so many children who are born with the infection and give them a chance for a healthy life with a future. Once again we were looking at what we believe is an appropriate response to the Millennium Development Goals.

The conference drew together knowledge, commitment and hope. Certainly one key aspect of this conference was showing that we can have the confidence to move forward and there is real hope for the future. That is a big movement in this issue that has been facing the world in the 20 years since HIV was first identified as a virus. We have an active role to play. AusAID has been leading the way, with our international aid commitments. We have the parliamentary group on HIV, which is now part of the process in this place, to raise awareness. I hope that, at the conference in two years time in Korea, Australia will again take a strong leadership role.