

Governor General: "We cannot ignore AIDS"

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The Candlelight Memorial services held around the country on Sunday night were an opportunity for our LGBT community to remember those who have lost their life to AIDS, and to recommit individually and as a community to halt the spread of the HIV virus in New Zealand.

2005 saw the greatest number of new diagnoses of HIV infection in New Zealand, ever. A 17 % increase in the rate of infections saw 183 people finding out they were HIV positive. More people are now becoming infected with HIV than were diagnosed after the pandemic struck in the early 1980s. Back then, there was significant media attention around HIV and AIDS, with many connecting the disease, for better or for worse, with the homosexual law reform campaign of the time.

Now, however, being gay or lesbian is more widely recognised as mainstream in New Zealand, and the media has covered the significant advances for LGBT rights, most recently with the passing of civil union legislation. But media attention is increasingly shying away from the AIDS pandemic, as many in the LGBT community and in New Zealand society as a whole have tired of hearing about 'sick people,' leaving HIV sufferers to struggle in silence, and the prevention message to wane.

The New Zealand AIDS Foundation is striking back with new internet-based campaigns and has targeted gay male couples for the first time, in their 'Love Is' (always wearing a condom) advertising campaign at this year's Out Takes Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

Politicians too cannot afford to ignore the problem. Both the Prime Minister Helen Clark and the Leader of the Opposition Don Brash have declared their support to the New Zealand AIDS Foundation and both stress the need for urgent action.

In her Candlelight Memorial speech, read to gatherings throughout the country on Sunday evening, Governor-General Dame Silvia Cartwright, patron of the Foundation strongly urged New Zealanders not to ignore AIDS.

PM Helen Clark reminded us of the need for urgent action, and Opposition Leader Don Brash highlighted the global nature of the problem. Visiting gay Australian High Court judge and Honorary Fellow of the Legal research Foundation of New Zealand, Justice Michael Kirby, also lent his support to the fight against HIV and AIDS, saying we must start by expressing 'more love for our fellow human beings.'

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From the Prime Minister, Helen Clark:

Today, in services around the country, we remember those who have died from AIDS since the first death in New Zealand in 1985.

Today we must also acknowledge the significant work of the New Zealand Aids Foundation in educating and informing all New Zealanders about HIV/AIDS, and in helping those who live with the disease every day.

HIV/AIDS remains one of the world's most pressing public health issues and is recognised as a significant problem in our own region.

It is critical that we do not become complacent here at home in New Zealand. The number of people in New Zealand diagnosed with HIV hit a record high in 2005. This is a very worrying trend and one we cannot ignore.

New generations of New Zealanders need to be informed about prevention and reminded about the painful past lessons we have learned. It is important for us to build on our considerable past achievements in combating the spread of HIV/AIDS, as well as learning from international experience as we move to meet these challenges.

I thank the New Zealand AIDS Foundation, the community-based groups, and the people living with HIV/AIDS who play a pivotal role in promoting measures to combat HIV/AIDS.

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From the Leader of the Opposition, Don Brash

HIV and AIDS continue to affect the lives of thousands of New Zealanders every year - and not just those living with HIV and AIDS, but those working in the field of support and prevention too. In particular, I would like to pass on my sympathies to those who are here tonight remembering a friend or family member lost to AIDS over the past twenty years.

We should also remember the problems of HIV and AIDS in the wider global community, especially in developing countries where many children are affected and the majority of people affected do not have access to medical treatments.

While we must support those who continue to look for a cure, it is important to remember that the fight against HIV and AIDS is not just about providing new drugs or a vaccine. It is also about making sure that we have trained counsellors and nurses, and that we continue to educate people about safer sexual practices, remembering HIV is preventable.

I give my complete support to the efforts of the New Zealand AIDS Foundation in their continued campaign to raise awareness of, and dispel myths around, HIV and AIDS. This evening is just one aspect of their hard work and services, which are offered year-round.

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From the Governor-General, Dame Silvia Cartwright:

Tena koutou katoa

My warmest welcome to everyone gathered here and throughout New Zealand for the Candlelight Memorial Services.

Tonight is a special night. It is a time for us to remember those New Zealanders who have lost their lives to AIDS since the first death in 1985.

It is also a time for our country to reflect on the threat this virus continues to pose.

AIDS has been a reality for New Zealand for many years now. It is much better understood than in the first frightening years of its discovery.

However, we are still at war with an epidemic for which we are yet to develop a cure.

As our knowledge and understanding of AIDS grows, so does the toll this virus takes on human life, both in New Zealand and around the world.

Just last year, new diagnoses in NZ reached an all-time high. This is an avoidable tragedy not just for those New Zealanders who contracted the virus, but for their families and friends too.

That is why the work of the New Zealand AIDS Foundation is so important. We cannot ignore AIDS. On-going education is critical, as is support for those who deal with the every-day reality of AIDS.

Thank you to all who are here tonight. Your determination to stop this virus honours those who have lost their lives and their loved ones to AIDS.

Tena koutou katoa

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From The Hon Justice Michael Kirby:

HIV/AIDS is a universal concern. The Queen made our response to it the centrepiece of her annual Commonwealth Day Message delivered in Sydney during her recent visit.

But many people think it is all over for us in New Zealand and Australia. This is far from the case. We need more science; more social support; cheaper therapies and an effective vaccine; more awareness in the new generation at risk; and a new and heightened international approach.

Basically, this requires more love for fellow human beings. The work of the New Zealand AIDS Foundation is more important than ever in tapping our feelings of love and identification. One day HIV/AIDS will be beaten. In the meantime, we must remember those who live with HIV. We must inform and protect those who are at risk.

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