





# Adjunct Professor Darryl O'Donnell

# Chief Executive Officer Health Equity Matters

World AIDS Day 2023 marks an important milestone in our journey towards ending transmission of HIV.

Just months ago we learned inner Sydney is the first place in the world to virtually eliminate HIV transmission. New HIV notifications are down 88 per cent. The UN targets are now more than an aspiration. Sydney, once the epicentre of the HIV epidemic in Australia, proves the targets are reachable.

This profound achievement clarifies not just what's possible, but also what's necessary. HIV is not over for anyone until it is over for everyone, and universal access to healthcare must light our path. Important work commenced this year with the establishment of the Commonwealth's HIV Taskforce, chaired by Health Minister Mark Butler. It includes community representatives such as Health Equity Matters, alongside medical and research experts with a focus on hard-to-reach populations.

The Taskforce's efforts were bolstered by the Federal Government's \$19.7 million Budget commitment to expand access to HIV testing, treatment and information, and better support the HIV workforce. The funding expands access to HIV treatment for people who are ineligible for Medicare, better supports Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations that deliver testing, treatment and care services, and supports innovative technology and digital tools.

Of course, the HIV epidemic touches all people, of all cultures and we are determined to share our experiences



in the hope to accelerate efforts in our region. This year, we established and funded the Pacific Community Leadership Program, which aims to support current and emerging leaders in areas such as governance, management, strategic direction, stakeholder management and other forms of leadership across the Pacific region.

Our existing work in programs such as the Global Fund-supported Sustainability of HIV Services for Key Populations in Southeast Asia (SKPA-2) powered ahead and took an increasingly granular data-driven rigour. Our sustainability pulse check dashboard provides regular survey results to test the effectiveness of the program as countries progress toward sustaining their own HIV response.

After nearly forty years as the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, we adopted a new identify this year as Health Equity Matters to signal our expanded mission to address wider health needs, especially within the LGBTIQA+ and HIV-affected communities. These communities often face health disparities, from HIV treatment access to mental health issues. Health Equity Matters aims to end these inequities, with the virtual elimination of HIV transmission remaining a central goal.

With the inner Sydney declaration, Australia has proved the goal of ending HIV transmission is eminently achievable. Health Equity Matters will continue to strive to see this success become a reality not just in Sydney, but throughout Australia and around the world.

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# **Credits**

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#### Credits

The World AIDS Day booklet is developed by Health Equity Matters through a grant from the Commonwealth Department of Health. The booklet is part of the World AIDS Day Parliamentary Breakfast, which was initiated in 2010. Health Equity Matters recognises the leadership of Mr Bill Bowtell AO in conceiving this event.



# Senator Louise Pratt and Senator Dean Smith

Parliamentary Friends for ending HIV, STIs and other Blood Borne Viruses

As young people in the 1980s and 1990s, we both remember well the fear that gripped the community as the HIV epidemic emerged.

It was incurable, confounded doctors, tore families apart, and killed otherwise healthy young men and women in their thousands.

One need only consult that vast database of recent history, YouTube, and watch the infamous 1987 'Grim Reaper' advertisement that warned Australians of the dangers of HIV/ AIDS, to get a sense of the terror the then-untreatable disease instilled.

And as is so often the case with human nature, closely following the public fear was stigmatisation. This discrimination remained a common experience for those with the virus for many years. It remains as a barrier to treatment and prevention for many today. However, timely access to diagnosis and treatment means health outcomes for those with

HIV are very different today.

This has come from the dedication of scientists, clinicians, health organisations and, most importantly, from the leadership of those living with HIV and affected communities.

In a developed country such as Australia, people with HIV can expect to live a normal lifespan by taking just one antiretroviral drug a day. These drugs are subsidised





through the Federal Government's Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

We are in a position where the approximately 28,000 Australians living with HIV have a suppressed viral load, meaning they cannot transmit the virus to sexual partners. There has been a 48% decline in HIV diagnoses over the past 10 years.

We know this success means we can't allow an 'out of sight, out of mind' attitude to take hold, especially in Australian communities where stigmatisation still affects people's access to diagnosis and treatment.

Here in Australia, we are now working in partnership with researchers, clinicians and communities to develop Australia's ninth National HIV strategy, aimed at achieving the goal of virtual elimination of HIV transmission by 2030.

Meanwhile, the extent of the virus in less developed parts of the world should also shake us out of any sense of 'victory' over HIV/AIDS.

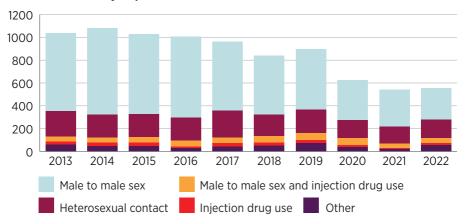
Approximately 630,000 people worldwide died with the virus in 2022, while there are 39 million people with virus globally, two-thirds of them in Africa. Sadly, those most susceptible to acquiring HIV are generally the most disadvantaged in developing nations. Increasing testing and improving access to life-saving anti-retroviral medication in these countries must be a focus of our diplomacy in these regions.

As a truly bi-partisan group, the Parliamentary Friends For Ending HIV, STIs And Other Blood Borne Viruses is committed to supporting the advancement of medical science, removing

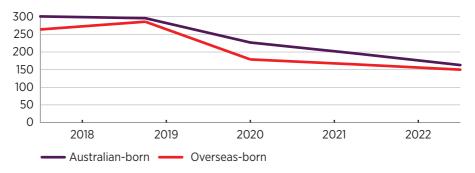
discrimination and progressing the reforms needed to virtually eliminate HIV transmission in Australia.

# HIV in Australia 2023

#### HIV notifications by exposure



#### HIV and gay and bisexual men, Australian-born versus overseas-born



Source: King, J, McManus, H, Kwon, A, Gray, R & McGregor, S 2023, HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia: Annual surveillance report 2023, The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, Australia



# Senator the Hon Penny Wong Minister for Foreign Affairs

World AIDS Day is a time to reflect on the remarkable progress made in the fight against HIV.

Progress made through community leadership, partnerships with scientists, government and public health experts. Progress through evidence-based policy.

In 2022, the number of new infections globally fell to its lowest point since the 1980s.

UNAIDS reports that of the 39 million people living with HIV globally, a record 29.8 million are receiving life-saving treatment.

However, more work is required to maintain hard-fought gains and push for further progress.

Last year there were 6.5 million people living with HIV in Asia and the Pacific, with alarming increases in new infections in several countries.

Australia is working to build genuine partnerships based on respect and listening to help our neighbours end HIV transmission.

In August, I launched Australia's new International Development Policy, which prioritises locally led development, including with civil society.

It commits Australia to share our knowledge, experience, networks and capability to help build health systems and manage the disease.



Our new five-year, \$620 million Partnerships for a Healthy Region initiative is supporting the policy, funding new programs to address HIV in the Pacific and Southeast Asia, and complementing our ongoing contributions to UNAIDS and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Stigma, discrimination and inequality continue to put key populations at risk,

and we are seeing gender equality and human rights curtailed in some parts of the world.

We know progress on HIV requires legal and policy frameworks which enable the fundamental rights of all people, including communities most at risk

Australia is stepping up engagement on LGBTQIA+ human rights, developing our first LGBTQIA+ human rights engagement strategy and supporting civil society organisations in Asia and the Pacific through our new Inclusion and Equality Fund.

There is a clear pathway to end AIDS by 2030, but we need to step up our collective efforts, and ensure human rights and the voices of the people living with HIV are at the heart of our strategies.

Australia's HIV transmission rate is amongst the lowest in the world, and we must share our knowledge and continue our support to achieve our objective of ending AIDS everywhere.



# The Hon Mark Butler MP Minister for Health and Aged Care

Reflecting on four decades of the HIV/ AIDS epidemic, I'm pleased there is much to be positive about as Australia moves ever closer to eliminating local HIV transmission.

We are aiming to reach that target by 2030 and that is well within reach. Ours will be one of the first countries in the world to do so.

HIV diagnoses in Australia have halved over the past decade and in 2022, just 555 diagnoses were reported. With readily available treatment and high-quality care, the vast majority of people living with HIV in this country enjoy good health and have a suppressed viral load.

But much work remains to be done. Most new HIV cases are still among gay and bisexual men, heterosexual people account for some 30%, and almost half of all diagnoses were classified as late. This means a person may have been living with HIV for some years without knowing it.

The UNAIDS theme of World AIDS Day in 2023 is a call to "Let Communities Lead". Australia's journey to eliminating HIV transmission will continue on the same path as our original approach since the late 1980s: communityled and driven and built on a foundation of bipartisanship, engagement and partnership.

In late 2022, the Albanese Government marked World AIDS Day by accelerating our efforts and announcing a new taskforce to drive Australia's HIV response and guide the development and implementation of our nation's 9th National HIV Strategy.



In the year since, the taskforce has worked hard to identify the challenges and gaps, outline the future vision for HIV in Australia and step out how we can achieve it.

The academics, health professionals, people living with HIV, sex workers, a First Australians health representative and members of the Government and the Coalition on the taskforce recognise that to get ahead we must

"Let Communities Lead".

Importantly the taskforce looks beyond 2030. They know eliminating local transmission is just one component of Australia's ongoing response to HIV.

Improving accessibility, awareness and the cost effectiveness of testing, treatment and care of people living with HIV is an enduring consideration. As is tackling the multi-level, system-wide stigma and discrimination people living with HIV continue to face in society.

We have much to do for gay and bisexual people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, First Nations people, women affected by HIV, and trans and gender diverse people.

And to support all this, we need to provide healthcare workers with ongoing training, support and education.

I'm proud that every step of our action on HIV has been in lock step with the long-time advocates and community leaders who took on the fight 40 years ago and who continue the war against HIV in 2023.



# Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham

#### **Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs**

World AIDS Day is a reminder of the ongoing importance of HIV/AIDS support, prevention, and research in Australia and an opportunity to acknowledge the critical advocacy and support provided by so many health and community organisations.

As advances in awareness, inclusion and medical technology continue, so does our hope for elimination of this illness with great transformations to prevention, treatment and protection.

Australia is just seven years away from our commitment to ending AIDS as a global public health threat by 2030 – the progress being made by organisations such as Health Equality Matters demonstrates that this goal is achievable.

Significant improvements in Australia have been seen in recent years, despite setbacks presented by COVID-19, with 91% of people living with HIV in Australia having been diagnosed and 92% of those receiving treatment.

Since HIV was first diagnosed in Australia our understanding of prevention, transmission and treatment has significantly improved, yet our focus must not waver from the critically important ongoing research.

There is still much more to do towards the elimination of HIV transmission in Australia while also ensuring access to treatment for an HIV-positive positive person, which is instrumental for quality of life. The power of technological breakthroughs is evidenced by the fact that



someone with HIV on effective treatment is now able to live as long and as healthy a life as a person who does not have HIV.

Australia has always been proud to contribute to global efforts of assistance and prevention for better health outcomes. Pledges to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria as well as ongoing partnerships with

UNAIDS are critical to the ongoing focus that must be maintained to ensure improvements are sustained.

Momentum within our own region has been propelled by consecutive Australian governments through investments to increase HIV testing and prevention services amongst key populations in the Indo-Pacific.

The Coalition strongly supports all efforts made by the Australian Government to continue providing direct support to countries of the Pacific and Southeast Asia regions on all aspects of infectious disease prevention, treatment and control.

Equally as important are the efforts we all must make to overcome stigma, discrimination and other challenges. Financial efforts of governments are important, but so too are the efforts of individuals within our communities who educate one another and are playing a key role every day in the elimination of HIV transmission in Australia.



# Senator the Hon Anne Ruston

# Shadow Minister for Health and Aged Care

World AIDS Day serves as an important platform for solidarity across the globe in the fight against HIV and AIDS, uniting individuals living with HIV, the organisations that support them, governments, and the wider community.

On World AIDS Day 2023, we have the opportunity to reflect on the remarkable progress that has been made to date, and the work that still remains ahead of us as we continue our pursuit of eliminating HIV transmission.

Importantly, we remember and acknowledge the more than 30 million lives tragically cut short by HIV, and the many other people who have been significantly impacted by the virus.

In Australia, it is an important opportunity to refocus our efforts and reaffirm our shared commitment to eliminating HIV transmission across our nation.

From the first reported case 42 years ago in 1981, Australia has made remarkable strides in the prevention and management of HIV and our country is respected as a global leader in the fight towards elimination.

Similarly, Australia has been at the forefront of research efforts and advances in innovation. Technology developments have offered hope, revolutionising prevention and treatment strategies and resulting in a decline in new HIV notifications across Australia.



With these life-changing developments, we must also continue to ensure that there is equitable, ongoing and affordable access to treatments in Australia.

Our understanding of HIV prevention, transmission and treatment has improved significantly since the virus was first diagnosed in Australia. However, the critical importance of research remains ongoing as we work

towards curbing the onward transmission of HIV across the globe.

World AIDS Day is also an important opportunity to acknowledge the longstanding advocacy of Health Equity Matters and the National Association of People with HIV Australia. You have played a critical role in leading the community response to HIV and we thank you for the ongoing support you provide to Australians living with HIV and their families.

Once again, as we mark World AIDS Day 2023, it is important that we recognise both the significant and life-changing progress we have made as a nation, and the work that still lies ahead in the global fight against HIV.

There is strong bipartisan support across the Australian Parliament towards eliminating HIV transmission, and we must continue to build on the encouraging progress seen to date, which has made an incredible difference in the lives of Australians impacted by the virus.



## Adam Bandt MP

# **Leader**The Australian Greens

This World AIDS Day, we can take a step closer to eliminating the disease, but we're not there yet.

Australia has recorded a steady decline in rates of HIV over the past decade, and could virtually eliminate the insidious disease, according to a study by the Kirby Institute. However, a higher rate of late infections persist, with 44% of people living unknowingly with the disease for four or more years.

There is reason to be positive though, with Australia's rate of decline being far ahead of other countries in Europe and the US.

The struggles to contain and eradicate the disease in these countries, though, demonstrate we must be vigilant and keep up the investment, testing and strategies to keep people safe.

We need to invest more in restoring these testing levels and following the plan set by Health Equity Matters and the National Association of People with HIV Australia.

But this year's theme "Let Communities Lead" is a great reminder of the progress being made by communities affected by this condition. It aims to encourage people to educate themselves and their communities and take action—we're



heading in the right direction, but we're not done vet.

There's still a lot more we can do. Working with people with HIV, we can tell the story of how it's transmitted and encourage people to keep getting tested. We can make sure it's easier to get tested, treatment and care. The sooner someone gets treated, the better. The sooner we get to it, the better the outcome.

One group greatly affected by this issue is the First Nations communities.

The number of First Nations people with HIV was rising. With reduced testing, there is concern that the numbers could be increasing without people's knowledge.

The Greens support efforts to eradicate this disease. We understand the importance of continuing what's working now, and helping countries in our region to continue—and win—the battle with HIV.

We need to eliminate HIV—here and everywhere.

We support contributing to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Health Equity Matters, the Pacific Friends of Global Health, and the National Association of People with HIV Australia, along with other partner organisations that are dedicated to eliminating HIV and AIDS.

# HIV Globally 2022 39.0 million People living with HIV 37.5 million adults 1.5 million children 29.8 million Approximately 76% of all

Source: unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet

People were newly diagnosed with HIV

1.3 million

People with HIV were accessing antiretroviral therapy

people living with HIV

This is a 59% reduction from the peak in 1995



# The Hon Ged Kearney MP

# Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care

Over the course of the last year, I've had the privilege to serve as Deputy-Chair of the HIV Taskforce. My work with the Taskforce has given me a renewed appreciation for just how powerful the community-led response was and continues to be in driving down HIV infections.

As a nurse in public hospitals in the 1980s, I remember well the devastation but also the hope that came from the individuals and organisations who quickly rallied together to care for one another. This is the lasting legacy of that time.

We have come so far since those dark early days – but we still have a lot of work to do. In particular, stigma remains a big challenge in our response. Its impact upon people living with HIV causes hurt and harm, and hampers our efforts to get toward elimination.

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities face additional layers of stigma. It impacts their health care and their mental health. It creates barriers to prevention, testing and treatment. The consequence is gay and bisexual men born overseas are a growing proportion of those newly diagnosed with HIV.



Earlier this year, I had the honour to chair the HIV Youth Roundtable where I heard firsthand experiences of young people when it comes to prevention, testing, treatment, care and stigma. Their feedback was invaluable in guiding the work of the Taskforce. The young people I spoke to honoured the legacy of those lost to HIV/AIDS – they described themselves as standing on the shoulders of giants.

I'm proud our Government is building on the longstanding bipartisan efforts to change these outcomes and achieve the elimination of HIV transmission.

I'm proud that we are so close to living in an Australia where those young people I met with don't have to experience the loss that so many who came before them had to endure.

This is an exciting time in our shared fight, and I'm so proud to stand with you as I did all those years ago as a nurse, as we do justice to the legacy of those we have lost.

Together we will get to zero.



## Erika Olsen

# **Deputy Chief of Mission**

for the United States in Australia

Today marks the 35th anniversary of World AIDS Day, first commemorated in 1988 as a day of solidarity to honour people living with and lost to HIV and AIDS.

For more than two decades, the United States has played a critical role in mounting an equitable, inclusive challenge to the transmission of HIV and AIDS including through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) launched in 2003.

PEPFAR not only remains perhaps the single greatest public health achievement in history – having saved an astounding 25 million lives – but it has also demonstrated the importance of equity in our work to eliminate HIV/AIDS in the US and around the world – focusing on expanding access to treatment and prevention measures for marginalised communities.

The landscape of HIV/AIDS has dramatically changed, transitioning from an emergency response to a sustainable strategy of control and potential elimination. We owe this transformation to the relentless work of healthcare professionals, advocates, and international partners, ensuring that initiatives cater to the most vulnerable populations.

Reflecting on the reality of the situation in 2003 when PEPFAR was launched, we recall that despite the availability of antiretroviral



treatments, access in regions like sub-Saharan Africa was critically limited. The introduction of PEPFAR marked a turning point in the global HIV/AIDS crisis. Focused on heavily impacted areas, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, this largest-ever commitment to combating a single disease has fundamentally shifted the trajectory of HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention.

Today, as we face the combined global health challenges of HIV/AIDS and COVID-19, the infrastructure, knowledge, and resilience built through our HIV/AIDS response are instrumental in enhancing our pandemic response. The PEPFAR program has been pivotal, leveraging its vast resources to support COVID-19 vaccine distribution and care services, showcasing the adaptability and strength of our global health engagement.

As we mark World AIDS Day, the goal of controlling and ultimately ending HIV/AIDS as a public health threat by decade's end is more promising than ever. The key to our continued success lies in persistent global collaboration, equitable access to care, and unwavering commitment to reaching the most affected communities. Our gratitude extends to everyone contributing tirelessly towards these objectives, propelling us closer to a world free from the scourge of HIV/AIDS.

# Driving the Agenda Forward on Sustainable HIV Financing in Asia and the Pacific: Health Equity Matters' SKPA-2 Program

The Sustainability of HIV Services for Key Populations in Southeast Asia (SKPA-2) program is a three-year, US\$12.5 million initiative funded by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria for the period 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2025.

Health Equity Matters is the Principal Recipient of the grant and provides technical assistance and support to local and regional partners.

SKPA-2 builds upon the work and achievements of the first iteration of the program, called SKPA-1, which promoted HIV prevention services for key populations.

The aim of SKPA-2 is to improve sustainability of evidence-informed, prioritised HIV services

for key populations in Bhutan, Mongolia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

Since its establishment in July 2022, SKPA-2 has laid strong foundations for the successful implementation of its agenda.

# **Baseline assessment reports**

Following in-country data collection in 2022, the suite of SKPA-2 baseline assessments was published. These assessments provide a thorough situational analysis of each of the countries that SKPA-2 works in, and have become the backbone of the program to help ensure activities have the greatest possible impact. The reports were well received by the



Health Equity Matters SKPA-2 team along with country sub-recipient and technical assistance partners together in Bangkok. Thailand reviewing program activities in September 2023.

funder, and, importantly, were endorsed by government representatives from each of the SKPA-2 countries.

# Community-led monitoring pilots

A key element of SKPA-2 programming is community-led monitoring. This mechanism is used by communities to generate accountability for the quality and accessibility of HIV services. The purpose is to influence decision-makers to propose solutions that overcome the barriers identified and experienced by communities when accessing services. Pilots have been implemented in Bhutan, Mongolia and Sri Lanka.

# Health systems financing

The central goal of SKPA-2 is to help countries identify sustainable solutions to HIV financing from within their own government budgets, and for these funds to support community-led organisations. Following information and data gathered during the baseline assessments, SKPA-2 has this year developed small-scale pilots to demonstrate the ability of government to fund community-led organisations, putting communities front and centre in providing prevention, testing and treatment.

# HIV services and programmatic sustainability

All countries are at different stages regarding the registration, access and uptake of PrEP and HIV self-testing. In Mongolia, a PrEP demonstration project was completed with data presented to the government. There was also an emphasis on reviewing national strategic plans and standard operating procedures across all countries. A scoping assessment was conducted in

Sri Lanka to assess the feasibility of establishing the country's first trans and gender-diverse health clinic

# **Human rights and gender**

To achieve sustainable financing and HIV services it is critical to address human rights and gender barriers. Under SKPA-2, country partners have been building the capacity of community-led organisations through activities such as legal literacy training and advocacy plan development. In 2023, there has also been promising progress in Sri Lanka regarding the decriminalisation of homosexuality, which has been actively supported by our in-country partners. We hope there will be more positive news on this front by the end of 2023.

SKPA-2 continues to strengthen all aspects of its program, including its partnerships with stakeholders, the focus and impact of its activities and the expertise and skills of the Health Equity Matters SKPA-2 team. The program moves at an incredibly fast pace and is always adapting—we look forward to continuing to make progress and to solidifying the impact of our program throughout 2024.



A technical visit by Health Equity Matters SKPA-2 staff to our Sri Lankan sub-recipient, Family Planning Association Sri Lanka in April 2023.



# **Professor Paul Kelly**

#### **Chief Medical Officer**

Department of Health and Aged Care

Decades of hard work and collaboration among people living with HIV and their communities, civil society, health workers, researchers and governments have put Australia on track to be one of the first countries in the world to eliminate local HIV transmission by 2030.

While Australia has an outstanding record on combatting HIV in our own nation, we are also a long-standing supporter of global efforts. As a member of the global community, we provide an example of world-leading efforts to minimise HIV transmission, and support other countries in responding to HIV/AIDS.

Australia showcased its global leadership on HIV this year as the host of IAS 2023, the 12th International AIDS Society Conference on HIV Science, in Brisbane, IAS 2023 provided a forum for the HIV sector to exchange information on research, policy, science and health services to foster collaboration and partnership towards our common goal. The Conference provided Australia with the opportunity to re-affirm its commitment to the "undetectable equals untransmittable (U=U) message. U=U is a scientific truth that a person living with HIV who has reached viral suppression has no risk of transmission to a sexual partner. This empowers people living with HIV to engage in fulfilling sexual relationships and make family planning decisions with confidence. It is also a powerful tool in destigmatising HIV, promoting the message that living a long, good and safe life with HIV

is possible.

Having completed my PhD on HIV and tuberculosis more than 25 years ago, it was impactful to see how much HIV and AIDS science has developed in the intervening years, and how much progress we have made over this time. This really is a time of hope for the world.

We are now at a place where the virtual elimination of HIV transmission in Australia is achievable. However,

there remain significant challenges which require adaptation and refinement of our approach. We are striving for a more equitable and accessible system where everyone who lives with or is at risk of HIV can obtain evidence-based and contemporary information, quality prevention, testing, treatment and care where they need it and when they need it, without fear of stigmatisation.

IAS 2023 re-affirmed that knowledge, leadership, and community partnerships are critical components in our domestic and global response to HIV. The elimination of HIV transmission will not be possible without science and research leading to equitable and effective clinical services, nor will it be achievable in the absence of effective public health policy and community supports.

As we set our sights on 2030 with the report from the HIV Taskforce and upcoming Ninth National HIV Strategy, we are thinking ambitiously about what is possible with the support of our committed partners, who have characterised Australia's response since the beginning.



## **Peter Sands**

#### **Executive Director**

Global Fund to Fight AIDS. Tuberculosis and Malaria

In the global fight against HIV, we have made notable progress over the last two decades. The Global Fund partnership, with support from Australia, has been at the heart of that progress. In countries where the Global Fund invests, AIDS-related deaths have declined by 72% since the Global Fund was founded in 2002, and new infections have dropped by 61%. Together, our partnership has saved 59 million lives.

Still, HIV remains a huge public health threat. In 2022, 630,000 people died of AIDS-related causes. This year marks the midpoint of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda, but the world is still off track to achieve the global target of ending AIDS by 2030. New HIV infections, particularly among key populations, have risen in many parts of the world.

In Asia and the Pacific, there were 300,000 new infections in 2022, up from 261,000 in 2021. The HIV response in the region is hampered by inequalities and an epidemic that affects diverse communities in different ways. HIV in the region disproportionately affects people from key populations, especially young people and their sexual partners. A combination of HIV prevention services, including harm reduction services, self-testing and virtual interventions, along with greater provision of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) are underway. Several countries, such as Vietnam, have reported significant increases in the uptake of PrEP. However, sizable gaps in



prevention service coverage remain, particularly among young people.

Stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and key populations continue to pose major barriers to HIV prevention, treatment and care. Punitive laws and harsh policies fuel stigmatisation and often lead to targeted discrimination and violence against key populations, including LGBTQA+ people. Fear of

violence, abuse, and incarceration hinders access to prevention and treatment services. Community engagement is the key to reaching key populations and breaking down those barriers. Community-led services connect key populations with health workers, counselors and peer educators to maintain HIV testing and prevention, health information and other services.

We have the knowledge and the tools to end HIV as a public health threat. We must deploy innovations faster to those who need them most and redouble our efforts to end the stark inequities that fuel this disease. We are tremendously grateful to Australia for supporting the Global Fund's fight against HIV, as well as committing to HIV services in Indo-Pacific countries. The fight against HIV is a platform for defeating all other infectious diseases – those we face right now and those that will likely emerge in the future.

We look forward to continuing to partner with Australia to end HIV as an epidemic by 2030 and build a healthier, safer and more equitable world.



# Emeritus Professor Janice Reid Ac

# **Deputy Chair**Pacific Friends of Global Health

On World AIDS Day 2023, we celebrate the enormous efforts by communities, organisations and governments to accelerate action in the fight to end HIV and AIDS by 2030, after COVID-19 knocked progress off track.

In countries where the Global Fund invests, for example, HIV prevention services increased by 22% between 2021 and 2022. On the ground in our region, that looked like 44,000 people in Papua New Guinea on anti-retroviral therapy for HIV in 2022, and 243,000 people reached with HIV prevention services in the Philippines. It meant that 1,600 mothers living with HIV in Myanmar received medicine to keep them alive and prevent transmission of HIV to their babies, and that 683,000 HIV tests were taken by priority and key populations in Indonesia.

The path to ending HIV and AIDS in our region and globally is clear, but not guaranteed. In 2022, there were 300,000 new HIV infections in the Asia-Pacific region, up from 261,000 in 2021. COVID-19 clearly demonstrated the human impact that occurs when vital services are disrupted, resources are diverted and attention is divided. In a time of increasingly colliding global challenges—including growing conflicts. humanitarian crises, natural disasters, increasing impacts of climate change and new pandemics to name but a few—we need to ensure that the past four decades of tireless action, research and innovation, and service delivery can be maintained. This requires renewed and sustained political and financial



commitments from our leaders, as well as the recognition that the HIV response should be leveraged to better build health systems resilience and preparation for future global health challenges.

Australia continues to play a vital role in supporting our region and the world to reach these goals. Last year, we were proud to see the Australian Government contribute \$266 million

to the Global Fund's Seventh Replenishment; an increased pledge of 10% on the previous funding round. This year, we also saw renewed commitment to prevent, diagnose and treat HIV and AIDS and strengthen health systems in the region via the Government's five-year Partnerships for a Healthy Region Initiative. The newly released International Development Policy centered, most importantly, on listening to communities and building genuine partnerships to tackle current and future challenges facing our region. Ending HIV and AIDS is a choice, and we look forward to continuing to work with the Australian Government to see our region meet this goal.

Pacific Friends of Global Health raises political and public awareness of key global health issues facing the Indo-Pacific Region, and advocates to improve regional health outcomes through Australian Government investment in Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and other health programs. It is hosted by the Australian Global Health Alliance.







## **Professor James Ward**

# **Director**University of Queensland Poche Centre for Indigenous Health

This year's World AIDS Day theme is "Let Communities Lead". It could not be more apt for the ongoing work required to address HIV among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Ever since the onset of HIV in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been leading efforts to prevent HIV in Australia, and working to ensure people living with HIV have the best quality of life. I am reminded of the earliest HIV cases among our people, and the efforts of the Aboriginal Medical Services to assist our people living with HIV, often in the absence of funding. I am reminded of the many individuals—men, women, sistergirls and brotherboys—and their work to get messages out to communities. The early days were scary as we consciously worked to prevent HIV from becoming established in our communities. These efforts included the development of pre-test counselling cassettes in our first languages for use in clinics, our famous Condoman campaign, our VHS videos

produced in first languages, and our artwork and



messaging—all informing our people of HIV and its implications.

This work continues today, led by communities, at the community level and at the health services level, all over this great continent of ours. There is no doubt we have benefited from science, treatment as prevention, treatment, testing strategies, and PrEP, but the efforts of our communities in disseminating critical

messages have placed us in a strong position to continue fighting HIV.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health organisations such as NACCHO, its 150-plus-member primary care services and their state and territory affiliate organisations have been central to the epidemic, rolling out health promotion efforts and quality clinical care, treatment and management. Organisations like the Anwernekenhe National HIV Alliance, and the Positive Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Network have also worked tirelessly to ensure we have a voice and we are visible in the response. There are many more individuals working in sexual health who have ensured HIV does not enter their communities.



# The Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG

# Patron Kirby Institute, UNSW

The theme of World AIDS Day 2023 is: "Let Community Lead".

This has long been a principle observed in Australia to guide the response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It was the principle advocated by the scientists, community leaders and politicians who led our early response, including Professor David Cooper AC. first Director of the Kirby Institute at UNSW, and the others who helped lead our country out of the despair of those early days. It was also the principle advocated by the WHO Global Commission on AIDS: the UNDP Global Commission on HIV and the Law; and UNAIDS when they were established to mobilise the United Nations in the struggle against the AIDS challenge 40 years ago.

Paradoxically, in the absence of a cure or a vaccine, the best way to respond to HIV/ AIDS is to reach out to those most at risk. By empowering them to protect themselves and each other, those in the frontline and their communities could take a leadership role in working towards containment, and eventually to a vaccine and a cure. We should never forget the leadership shown by individuals and by our scientific and political institutions, which proved ready to undertake bold innovations to help turn things around during those early days of great danger.



At IAS 2023, the 12th International AIDS Society Conference on HIV Science, Professor Andrew Grulich of the Kirby Institute explained how inner-city Sydney was on track to be the first global city to achieve elimination of HIV transmission. The strategies adopted in Australia in this challenge have yielded many lessons for later challenges, including mpox and COVID-19, and will guide us in future pandemics.

In our region, Papua New Guinea is currently experiencing some of the highest rates of mother to child transmission of HIV in the world. This is a result of a lack of access to knowledge and therapies such as testing and treatment. New cases of HIV are unacceptably high in PNG and other neighbouring countries. In low- and middle-income countries, Australia has an obligation to teach the importance of preventing the transmission of HIV and other viruses. We must not turn away, so long as HIV and new pandemics continue to test us

On World AIDS Day 2023, the world will be ready to remember the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At a time of renewed war and suffering, Australia should continue to be a leader in promoting and upholding human rights. Let communities and vulnerable people lead us to the goals of this grand aspiration.





# **Professor Sharon Lewin AO**

**President**International AIDS Society

**Director**Doherty Institute

Despite the great scientific advances in our understanding of HIV—including the exciting news announced at the IAS 2023 conference in July that new HIV acquisitions have been virtually eliminated in the inner Sydney area—World AIDS Day is a time when we recognise and respect the great human toll of this infection and the lives it has cost. In 2022, there were still 630,000 deaths from HIV. A death from HIV is a fully preventable death and is a reminder that universal access to antiretroviral therapy, for both treatment and prevention, must remain a global priority.

This year, Brisbane hosted IAS 2023, the 12th International AIDS Society Conference on HIV Science, with close to 5,000 participants joining in person and online to listen to an impressive program of speakers sharing their latest research and their experiences living with HIV. It was great to see so many local people in attendance and our international guests enjoying all that sunny Brisbane had to offer. Both the community and our government did an outstanding job to ensure that as many visas as possible were available to all applicants who wanted to attend this meeting. The conference was an opportunity to shine a light on Australia's outstanding response to HIV in some—but not all populations, with significant challenges remaining to ensure First



Nations communities also reach virtual elimination of HIV.

Other important news from the conference included a presentation on the 'Geneva Patient', the sixth person considered 'cured' of HIV following a stem cell transplant, and results from a randomised trial to prevent vascular events (REPRIEVE) showing that daily statin in people with HIV reduced the chance of a major vascular event by

35%. We also heard that long-acting injectable PrEP was preferred by African women rather than daily oral PrEP, highlighting the need to address barriers to access for injectable PrEP, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

At the end of last year, 76% of all people living with HIV were receiving antiretroviral therapy, with 71% having an undetectable viral load. This means that for those virally suppressed their health is well protected and they cannot transmit HIV to other people. While this represents highly positive progress for adults living with HIV, viral load suppression in children living with HIV is only 46%—a reality that needs urgent attention.

On this World AIDS Day it is important we celebrate the spectacular progress we have made; however, HIV remains a major global challenge with much work still to do.



# Scientia Professor Anthony Kelleher

**Director** Kirby Institute, University of NSW

This year's World AIDS Day theme, "Let Communities Lead", honours the reality that communities are the experts on matters that affect them. It has been more than four decades since HIV/AIDS emerged, and our progress on understanding and controlling the virus has been remarkable. None of this would be possible without the leadership of affected communities. It is incredible to reflect upon how far we have come.

At IAS 2023, the 12th International AIDS Society Conference on HIV Science, in Brisbane this year, my colleague Professor Andrew Grulich shared that inner-city Sydney is on track to becoming the first jurisdiction in the world to achieve HIV elimination, with new data showing an 88% reduction in new cases of HIV since 2010. This outstanding achievement is testament to community leadership, and collaboration between government and research: the partnership approach that has characterised the Australian response to HIV/AIDS. But while this encouraging news provides proof of concept that HIV elimination is possible when service delivery, community engagement, robust research and government support are working together effectively, continued work is needed to both sustain and scale up these outcomes, and expand them nationally to populations that continue to be most at risk.



To help us do this, there continue to be exciting developments in HIV prevention, such as long-acting injectable PrEP, the next frontier of simplified HIV prevention. Expanded access to long-acting PrEP will be crucial to staying ahead of HIV in Australia, alongside sustained investment in tried and tested HIV strategies like treatment as prevention. This year, a decade-long study we co-led with Burnet Institute

found that a 27% increase in people accessing effective HIV treatment saw HIV infections decrease by 66% in Victoria and NSW.

Globally, we continue to conduct research to optimise HIV treatment regimens to improve access, such has through the D2EFT study, which reported in February two simplified treatments were as effective as standard of care for second-line therapy.

We can approach the very real possibility of elimination of transmission in Australia with pride for what our collective efforts can achieve. But the final hurdle may well be our greatest challenge. It will require continued innovations that extend well beyond new modalities of PrEP. We will need specialised, targeted campaigns and changes to service delivery to ensure prevention and testing is accessible for the populations who most need it. As has been the case for the entirety of the epidemic, this will not be possible unless we find ways to effectively engage with these communities and let them lead the way.



# **Professor Brendan Crabb** Ac

# **Director and CEO**Burnet Institute

Since the early days of the AIDS epidemic, Burnet Institute has been at the forefront of addressing some of the biggest challenges of HIV. Indeed, Burnet's response at the start of the HIV crisis is what led to the institute establishing itself as an independent body, and ultimately where the foundations for our organisation were laid.



Under the leadership of Professor lan Gust, Burnet developed from the outset a clear point of differentiation: ensuring that advances in basic research were translated into lasting health benefits, especially for people in the developing world.

The commitment made during the early years of the HIV crisis is still our guiding principle to this day. Impact and health equity are at the centre of everything we do.

In the past 40 years, we have seen tremendous advances in HIV prevention, treatment and care, underpinned by the collective efforts of communities, scientists, health practitioners and researchers. Burnet is proud to have contributed to these innovations, from leading discovery research focused on new classes of HIV drugs, to developing low-cost, point-of-care HIV diagnostics and supporting multiple national AIDS strategies across the world.



Over this period, we have also built extensive partnerships and relationships both in Australia and globally in a common pursuit to eliminate HIV. And we remain steadfast in maintaining and building upon these collaborations—especially with key populations and people living with HIV in Australia and abroad—to continue to guide our work.

In doing so, we must remain cognisant that advances in HIV have not been equitable around the world. While Australia has seen dramatic reductions in HIV transmission numbers over the last decade, for our neighbours in the region this is not the case. Rapidly escalating HIV epidemics in the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji demonstrate that there is still work to be done to end AIDS by 2030.

To achieve this, we must look beyond our shores to ensure our progress is inclusive and reaches all people, no matter their status, location, or background, so that no one is left behind. Simultaneously, we must not fall back from dismantling the stigma and discrimination that continues to affect people living with HIV and that limits others from accessing life-saving HIV testing, treatment, and prevention tools.

Burnet remains unwavering in our commitment to this endeavour: to achieve the global goal of HIV elimination and strive for a more equitable world through better health.



## **Eamonn Murphy**

Director, Regional Support Teams for Asia Pacific and Eastern Europe and Central Asia regions UNAIDS

In Australia the promise of ending AIDS as a public health threat is within reach.

National testing, treatment and viral suppression results are on track to reach the 95-95-95 targets by 2025. As of the end of 2021, 91% of people living with HIV were diagnosed, 92% of those diagnosed were on treatment and 98% of those on treatment had achieved viral suppression. We now know that inner-city Sydney—once the epicentre of this country's HIV epidemic—is a global frontrunner for eliminating HIV transmission. New infections there

These gains are due to a mix of state and civil society action. In fact, community leadership has been at the forefront of the Australia HIV response since day one.

have declined by almost 90% in the last decade

with only 11 HIV cases detected in 2022.

Community organisations led by men who have sex with men (MSM) have taken the lead in delivering prevention services and monitoring uptake. While new infections among MSM are rising rapidly or in very slow decline in many neighbouring countries, over the last 10 years Australia has had a 57% reduction. Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) use among MSM is widespread and increasing.

Sex worker organisations have advocated for the policy changes that created a context for their peer empowerment work to have the strongest possible results. HIV prevalence among sex workers in Australia is below 1%.

And community organisations play a key role in connecting migrants living with HIV to health, social, clinical and



legal services. This multidimensional support makes it possible for them to remain adherent to treatment, and therefore healthy.

From policy reform to research, demand creation to service delivery, communities are the critical link. They ensure through their advocacy and outreach that there is equitable access to services. They are the force that breaks down social, cultural, legal and

policy barriers blocking our path to ending AIDS by 2030.

On the occasion of World AIDS Day 2023, I take the opportunity to congratulate the government of Australia on its historical bipartisan commitment to partnering with civil society in the HIV response. This has moved the needle more quickly on the agenda. Communities have sounded the alarm that greater efforts are needed to reach young men who have sex with men, particularly those from migrant communities. We urge deepened and more focused cooperation to achieve this goal.

We also take the opportunity to thank the government and people of Australia for their meaningful contribution to strengthening HIV responses throughout the region. Through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) there have been game-changing investments in health and health systems. DFAT's ongoing support for HIV prevention in the region is helping countries achieve sustainable results through strategies including community-led monitoring and community testing. By centring community leadership in HIV program planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring, we move closer to an AIDS-free generation in Asia and the Pacific.



## **Professor Carla Treloar**

## Director

Centre for Social Research in Health, University of NSW

Since its establishment in 1990, the Centre for Social Research in Health has aimed to provide research that can support community leadership in the HIV response. We are indebted to our partners and collaborators in community, health service and policy agencies. Working together produces the highest quality research that is immediately useful for advocacy and action.

The Gay Community Periodic Surveys (GCPS) are the main data source on sexual, drug use, and testing and prevention practices related to the transmission of HIV among gay and bisexual men in Australia. Recruitment is conducted annually in Sydney, Melbourne and Queensland, and every two years in Adelaide, Canberra, Perth and Tasmania.

The 2022 GCPS data show that the high levels of HIV treatment and viral suppression reported by gay and bisexual men living with HIV are a continuing, positive achievement, with no obvious changes in these indicators through the years affected by COVID-19. Gay and bisexual men increasingly report the use of biomedical HIV prevention (PrEP or having an undetectable viral load) to protect themselves and their partners during sex, with HIV prevention coverage nearly returning to pre-COVID-19 levels in 2022, and the proportion of gay and bisexual



men reporting casual sex with a risk of HIV transmission falling. The data on testing is, however, less promising, with recent HIV and STI testing by gay and bisexual men remaining at lower levels than before COVID-19.

Our work continues to examine stigma as a key community concern for its impact on health and the delivery of quality healthcare. In a survey of 1,116 gay and bisexual men, those who

reported experiencing any stigma were more likely to avoid healthcare services as a strategy to avoid stigma. The results emphasised that health workers could take a stigma-sensitive approach to their clinical interactions, by recognising that clients may have a history of negative experiences in healthcare. This type of approach to care will increase the ability of services to work sensitively with gay and bisexual male clients and ensure that access to healthcare in this group is increased.

Findings from the National Stigma Indicators Survey support this call for a stigma-sensitive approach to providing care. In a 2022 survey of health workers across Australia, 18% indicated they would behave negatively towards people because of their sexual orientation and 32% indicated they would behave negatively towards others because of their HIV status.





## **Professor Adam Bourne**

#### **Acting Director**

Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University

This year marks 30 years since the establishment of what was then called the National Centre for the Study of STDs. Since 1998, it has been known as the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS). Set up to explore HIV risk practices and support needs for people living with HIV/AIDS at the height of the pandemic, our commitment to the health equity, rights and wellbeing of people living with HIV is as strong now as it was at our foundation.



with 35.8% reporting a current diagnosis of one or more mental health conditions, while at the same time the prevalence of HIV-related stigma and discrimination is still alarmingly high.

ARCSHS is proud to host HIV Futures, one of the longest-running studies of health, wellbeing, care and support for people living with HIV. The study continues to generate new knowledge that shapes our understanding of life with HIV and empowers policymakers and service providers to commission and design interventions that can advance quality of life.

It is in this context of continued need that we are pleased to soon begin a new study exploring the experiences of individuals recently diagnosed with HIV, with a particular emphasis on

While we have observed an increase in the proportion of participants with a good quality of life over the last five years (from 63.1% in 2018/2019 to 71.8% in 2021/2022), that still leaves one-in-five people with HIV experiencing poor quality of life—an experience significantly more common among those born overseas and those living in certain parts of the country where there is less access to social support for people living with HIV. Co-morbidities also continue to be a cause for concern among this population,

those born overseas. This study will be conducted in partnership with colleagues at the Kirby Institute, building on the seroconversion-related research they have led for a number of years. It will provide important contextual information regarding individuals' HIV literacy, self-assessed HIV risk, and missed opportunities for HIV testing within general practice, sexual health services, and university health services. We look forward to sharing the findings of this study in forums and meetings over the coming months and years.

On World AIDS Day 2023, we reaffirm our commitment to meaningful involvement of people living with HIV in our research and reemphasise our belief as a Centre that research in this sector must hold at its core a commitment to human rights and equity. Now is a moment to celebrate all that has been accomplished in the Australian HIV response and to focus our attention on the challenges that are still ahead of us.



# **Alexis Apostolellis**

#### **Chief Executive Officer**

Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine

To eliminate HIV transmission in Australia and in our region, we need a strong healthcare workforce.

ASHM is Australia's peak clinical body representing the health workforce in HIV, viral hepatitis and sexual health. We play our part in ending HIV transmission in Australia by ensuring that health workers are trained, supported and enabled to provide the best care possible for people living with and affected by HIV, through education, clinical guidelines, policy, and evidence-based information and resources.

Formed in the 1980s by passionate clinicians on the front lines of the HIV epidemic in Australia, ASHM has grown over the past 35 years to include the breadth of the health workforce not only working in HIV, but in viral hepatitis and sexual and reproductive health. Our members are GPs, specialists, nurses, social workers and others, and the work they do is a key part of the Australian HIV response.

Partnerships between affected communities and healthcare workers will always be critical to ending HIV. Over the past year we've seen how important that is in the Australian response, as ASHM has worked alongside the National Association of People with HIV Australia (NAPWHA) to facilitate the rollout of HIV treatment access for all people living with HIV, regardless of Medicare status.



These partnerships are also critical in our region, where in some countries—including Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines—the HIV epidemic is worsening.

But there have also been successes. Effective examples of community-led HIV services show that collaboration between community and health workers can lead to HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care that is

accessible, person-centred and free from stigma.

In July, during IAS 2023, the 12th International AIDS Society Conference on HIV Science in Brisbane, ASHM held a high-level roundtable to discuss ways to improve community and health workforce collaborations to eliminate HIV in our region. In partnership with APCOM, which represents community organisations throughout Asia and the Pacific, ASHM brought together community, government, and health workers from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, Delegates shared expertise and experiences from HIV responses in their own countries to identify healthcare models that can make an impact on rising rates of HIV across our region. The message was clear: we know what works. By investing in these collaborations, we can turn the tide of the epidemic.

The incredible success of Australia's HIV response has shown us that elimination is possible. But there is still a lot of work to be done. We haven't ended the HIV epidemic until we have ended it everywhere, and we have made sure no one is left behind.

# napwha national association of people with HIV australia

#### **Scott Harlum**

#### **President**

National Association of People with HIV Australia

We are living in turbulent times. It can often feel like we are being tossed from one crisis to another and this can take a toll on our emotional health. Which is why it is important we all give ourselves some time to reflect and take stock. World AIDS Day is a good time to do this.

This is the day we should celebrate our victories. The emergence of lifesaving therapies in the 1990s. The discovery of U=U in the 2010s. And the simpler, kinder antiretroviral treatments we are lucky enough to have today.

Each year on 1 December, many of us also choose to call up the faces and names of those we have lost. Some were old mates or lovers. Some we worked with and admired. Others are famous faces. All left us too soon.

If we lived with HIV through those years and survived, we may still wonder why. Was it luck or genes or simply good timing that allowed us to carry on? For some of us, this is the simple reason why we continue to work in the sector. To contribute when so many cannot.



World AIDS Day is also a time to acknowledge the gaps. To consider those who are not doing so well. People new to Australia who are still automatically refused permanent residency based simply on their HIV positive status. Those living with HIV who are unaware of the fact. Others struggling with new diagnoses. Long-term survivors who are faced with a multitude of other conditions that require time and money to manage.

Many who are encumbered by the rising cost of living and coping without secure housing.

This World AIDS Day, we have much to think about. Things to celebrate. Lives to honour. Challenges to address.

On behalf of NAPWHA, the National Association of People with HIV Australia, I thank you for your investment in HIV and wish you well.



# Mish Pony

#### **Chief Executive Officer**

Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association

The theme for this year's World AIDS Day, "Let Communities Lead" is one sex workers have stood behind for more than 40 years. Our commitment to the principle of "nothing about us without us" demonstrates the effectiveness and sustainability of sex worker-led organisations in the response to HIV.

Sex workers in Australia still face the harmful consequences of criminalisation, and unacceptable levels of discrimination and stigma. Criminalisation pushes sex workers underground and hinders access to essential healthcare, support services and legal protection. Comprehensive legal reforms and a shift in public perception are required to ensure the rights, health and safety of all sex workers. Scarlet Alliance and our members, with support from allies, continue to lead the advocacy for full decriminalisation of sex work and anti-discrimination protections as a vital step toward equality in Australia.

As a result of this advocacy, Australia has made great progress to decriminalise sex work in New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Victoria, with commitments to do so in Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. However, there remains a substantial amount of work to be done



in those and other jurisdictions to effectively implement evidence- and rights-based policy and legislation. By eliminating punitive measures against sex work, we foster an environment in which sex workers can access the necessary resources without fear and discrimination. Explicit anti-discrimination and anti-vilification protections are also essential across all jurisdictions to ensure the rights of sex workers are protected against

systemic prejudice and bias.

Importantly, as states and territories progress to decriminalisation, sex worker peer organisations are actively engaging with workplace health and safety regulators to ensure that sex industry guidance materials are relevant and effective. Shifting from a criminal approach to a workplace health and safety framework will ensure that the success that sex workers have achieved in the response to HIV will be ongoing.

On World AIDS Day 2023, let us reaffirm the importance of holding space for the voices and experiences of sex workers and the urgent need to "Remove Laws that Harm, Create Laws that Empower". By embracing these ideals, we pave the way for a more inclusive and effective response to HIV.



# John Gobeil

#### Chief Executive Officer

Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League

On World AIDS Day 2023, the Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug User League (AIVL) celebrates the world-leading, peer-led, harmreduction national response of the community of people who use drugs. We especially celebrate the lives saved among people who inject drugs through the sustainable development and implementation of needle and syringe programs, peer-led testing, treatment, awareness and education campaigns, essential national network coordination strategies, and work by other crucial drug users organisations throughout the HIV epidemic in Australia.

We are deeply grateful for the amazing peers and workers who dedicated themselves to supporting their community. We acknowledge the longlasting legacy of friends, family members, and community members who were tragically lost along the way. We will continue to fight laws that criminalise and stigmatise people who use drugs in Australia and prevent marginalised community members from accessing health and harm reduction services, particularly for testing and treatment of blood-borne viruses. This is particularly acute among people in custodial settings and Indigenous peoples, who are at high risk of permanent liver damage.

Despite the 2030 elimination goals, there are still no still no needle and syringe programs in prisons in Australia. We know that every dollar invested in peer-led and proven harm-reduction

services saves \$27 to society—yet funding remains insufficient. This includes funding for life-saving, evidence-based drug-checking services that could prevent 1,700 unintentional overdose deaths annually as a result of unregulated supplies and a lack of appropriate support.

Our organisation welcomed the Australian Government's decision to include Opioid Substitution Therapy medications on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. This decision will prevent further human rights violations and ensure health equity and affordable access to these medicines for our communities. AIVL is also working with the Department of Health to update our National Needle and Syringe Program Directory and is partnering with the National Centre for Education and Training on Addictions to develop an alcohol and other drug harm reduction National Peer Work Framework to prevent blood-borne viruses and STIs. Our organisation continues to support peers in Tasmania in implementing awareness campaigns, with a view to establishing an independent peer-led organisation in the state.

AIVL strongly believes in a future anchored in self-determination, where everyone is included and seen as an integral part of society. People living with HIV, hepatitis C and hepatitis B deserve health equity and a life free of stigma, just like everyone else!



## **Colin Ross**

# **Chair**Anwerneake National HIV Alliance

I'm Colin Ross, a Jinibara Man from southeast Queensland and Chairperson of the Anwernekenhe National HIV Alliance (ANA). ANA is a community-based organisation that provides national leadership and promotes effective and culturally appropriate responses to tackle the challenge of HIV among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

World AIDS Day is a reminder that the fight to eliminate HIV transmission will only be successful if all communities are involved. This message has particular resonance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who are often impacted by infectious diseases at higher rates than non-Indigenous Australians, particularly in rural and remote communities facing specific barriers to health access.

Despite these disparities, the HIV notification rate in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has declined by 53 per cent between 2012 and 2021. While these figures are encouraging, it is important that we continue to improve HIV testing rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and increase the uptake of PrEP among those at risk. We also need to ensure our communities and the health workers and agencies who support them have a strong understanding of clinical prevention methods and are using them effectively. Failure to do so will lead to delayed diagnoses, higher rates of disease and increased burden on our communities and health agencies.



Utilising the knowledge, lived experience and wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are living with HIV—and dealing with related discrimination and stigma—is key to addressing the challenges of the disease and working towards its eventual elimination. We need to engage Indigenous Australians at every stage of the process, from prevention to testing, diagnosis, treatment and care. This must also

involve working in conjunction with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to co-design specific aspects of the response such as needs assessments and service delivery models. Leveraging the insights and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities will ensure that the HIV response is culturally sensitive and accessible to those who need it most.

Empowering communities is also crucial. Increased investment by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health services, better ways of accessing relevant information and improved collaboration between individuals, communities, front line health providers and other support organisations will strengthen our approach to combating HIV and ensure interventions are targeted and impactful.

World AIDS Day 2023 is an opportunity to reflect on the progress we have made and to recommit to our goal of eliminating HIV transmission. ANA will continue to fight for this goal and ensure no one is left behind.



# **HOLA (HIV Online Learning Australia)**

HIV Online Learning Australia (HOLA) is a workforce development program by Health Equity Matters and the National Association of People with HIV Australia (NAPWHA). HOLA increases the knowledge and skills of people working for AIDS Councils and people living with HIV organisations nationally. Over the first two years of the program, HOLA has delivered a range of online learning activities including self-directed eLearning modules, webinars and facilitated workshops to build the capacity of the HIV community workforce and equip people with the tools to work effectively with communities.

HOLA's 10 self-directed eLearning modules were developed to provide current baseline knowledge to the HIV community workforce on topics including HIV prevention, HIV testing and HIV-related stigma. Easily accessible on demand through HOLA's online learning portal, the modules include a diverse range of characters and scenarios to make the courses engaging and relevant to HOLA learners, particularly for those new to the HIV sector.

HOLA also ran a number of webinars that focused on translating research into practice and showcasing innovation through presentations and panel discussions. These sessions have received praise for the breadth of topics covered, which included HIV self-testing, minimising drug-related harm and young people living with HIV.

To develop and strengthen practical skills in the workforce, HOLA delivered 10 online facilitated workshops. Incorporating practical scenarios and breakout rooms, these workshops help learners build their capacity and equip

them with skills to work with different communities.

HOLA also released four discussion papers to generate knowledge of emerging issues, technology and practice in both Australia and internationally. Topics included:

- · HIV-related stigma interventions
- models of care for advancing the quality of life for people with HIV in Australia
- molecular epidemiology and phylogenetics
- new global approaches to HIV prevention.

The papers were launched at national webinars with the authors and panelists before being shared more widely across member organisations, communities of practice and social media.

To promote generative peer learning, HOLA convenes multiple ongoing communities of practice to share knowledge and develop skills through peer discussion and learning. These meetings have been valuable opportunities for those working in health promotion, peer education, and counselling and therapeutic services to network with peers around Australia and learn about valuable work happening in different jurisdictions.

An external evaluation found HOLA to be a high-quality program that met a critical need and that was effective in building the knowledge, skills and practice of the target workforce. The evaluation recommended the continuation of HOLA, and the HOLA team is excited to explore the next iteration of the program as it continues to develop and deliver a range of engaging online learning activities to the HIV community sector.



# **Dr Selina Namchee Lo**

# **Executive Director**Australian Global Health Alliance

World AIDS Day 2023 is critically important for the global health community to mark. It is an opportunity to recommit to the values and lessons from HIV/AIDS that were so hard learnt in the past. If the human species is to have any chance at combatting new diseases and the intersecting threat of climate change. it must learn from the past in order to move ahead. Australia is on the cusp of elimination of HIV/AIDS—and with new technologies there are even more opportunities for treatment and prevention. Yet tools without an enabling environment are but tools—and not a lasting solution.

Of great concern as a threat to gender equality and human rights is that we continue to witness increasing hate crimes and bills against LGBTQA+ communities globally. This threatens progress on HIV/AIDS, global health and human rights. Australian technical, political, and financial global health and HIV/AIDS leadership must stay the course—act with the exemplary bipartisanship it was known for during the height of the global HIV/AIDS crisis—and work with other countries to protect those communities most at risk and provide them with all the resources required.

Global health is about all of us, not some of us. Both the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the recent COVID-19 pandemic taught us that the determinants of health determine the trajectory of the public health response to any health crisis. We are currently experiencing a 'polycrisis'.



Pandemics, climate change—and the consequent natural disasters, diseases, displacements, and conflict—are acute immediate threats that require collective political and technical action and exacerbate each other. Yet the underlying weakest links—the determinants of global health—are ever present. Social, economic, commercial, cultural, political and ecological determinants of health require health sector action

and sound political leadership.

Each time we succeed or fail in collectively overcoming or addressing a disease threat we learn valuable lessons. Successes in responding to HIV/AIDS need to be resolutely repeated verbatim until they transform into customary norms through all global challenges that affect human health and wellbeing. Ongoing investment in science and knowledge systems for programs and policy design and systems to deliver research and development is needed as are human rights protections for those most at risk of discrimination and stigma.

The most important and poignant lesson this year for Australia is that we must draw a bold line under one of the most important HIV/AIDS global lessons and listen to the community. Community activism is now recognised by peer reviewed studies and journals as a global public health good. We cannot invest in or design the best health programs with impact without listening first to affected communities.



## Mark Orr AM

# National President Health Equity Matters

As we commemorate World AIDS Day, optimism about our progress in Australia is balanced by a steely resolve to intensify efforts abroad.

Here at home, an indefatigable coalition of priority populations advocates and community workers, clinicians, researchers and public officials have expanded access to PrEP and made sure everyone knows the power of treatment as prevention. They have made tests available, from lounge rooms to shopping centres, giving more people the tools and knowledge to look after their health.

These efforts, coupled with powerful health promotion through innovative digital communication, are driving a historic low in HIV transmission rates in Australia. We now have tangible proof we can get to zero.

Yet, despite this profound progress, stigma and discrimination linger. And the burden is heavy among men who have sex with men and people who inject drugs. This World AIDS Day we must recommit to demolishing these and other barriers to accessing high quality health care.

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, for example, need stronger support to eliminate unacceptable health inequities. And people on visas wishing to migrate to Australia are discouraged from testing for HIV for fear it will slow their application. This must change.



Moreover, our friends in the neighbouring Asia Pacific region need robust support to bounce back from the impact of COVID and to re-energise their fight against HIV. In this context, we are warmly appreciative of the Australian Government's resourcing commitments.

The Global Fund-supported
Sustainability of HIV Services for
Key Populations in Southeast Asia (SKPA-2)
program is making these commitments go
further, by powering up the capability and skills
of organisations similar to ours across the Asia
Pacific. Health Equity Matters is sharing what
we have learned in areas such as advocacy,
governance and financial management to help
our friends and colleagues sustain their own
HIV response.

This year, Health Equity Matters embraced a fresh identity, reflecting broader health concerns confronted by individuals in LGBTIQA+ communities and those living with HIV. These groups regularly encounter a range of health challenges, spanning from difficulties in accessing HIV treatments to mental health support. We are dedicated to eliminating these disparities, while continuing to prioritise the goal of HIV elimination.

Decades after HIV emerged, elimination of its transmission is a real and tangible possibility within reach. On this World AIDS Day, we recommit ourselves to reducing the impact of HIV and eradicating the stigma associated with it in every form wherever it is experienced.





















