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## **25 years of living with the AIDS pandemic** ~ Dr Bhagirath Singh

The August 16 International AIDS Conference in Toronto marked the 25th anniversary of the first reported cases of AIDS. Since then, HIV has infected more than 65 million people worldwide, of whom 25 million have died. This makes AIDS one of the worst pandemics in human history, affecting men, women and children in nearly every country in the world. In the year 2005 alone, nearly 4.1 million people worldwide became infected with HIV, and about 2.8 million individuals with HIV/AIDS died. More than 90% of these infections and deaths occurred in developing countries. In many African countries, the extent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has created a generation of orphans, reduced average life expectancy to less than 35 years, and destabilized civil society.

In Canada, HIV has infected approximately 60,000 people and has killed 13,000. Each year 2,500 new HIV infections are reported and more than 45,000 Canadians are living with HIV/AIDS, with significant impact on their life expectancy and quality of life. Aboriginal people account for more than 20% of HIV cases, while women continue to account for one quarter of positive HIV test reports, an increase from pre-1996, when they accounted for just over 10%.

Much has been done to transform HIV/AIDS from an almost certain death sentence into a chronic, manageable disease, with the development of a new class of anti-retroviral drugs, starting with 3TC, developed in Canada. Dramatic progress has been made in understanding HIV, the risk factors associated with HIV infection and in developing new drugs and treatments. Yet, eliminating this deadly disease is still merely a hope—not a reality.

After 25 years of living with AIDS, it is time to ask some hard questions. Why does the world remain so vulnerable to this epidemic? And what needs to be done to reverse the tide?

It is also a time to reaffirm our commitment to meeting the challenge posed by this virus. Make promising research and the development of the next generation of HIV-prevention strategies

such as microbicides, vaginal gels that women can use to protect themselves, a priority. Continue research on the development of better and safer drugs. Provide individuals and communities with the information they need to protect themselves. And focus on the development of a safe and effective HIV vaccine that can overcome the ability of the virus to mutate and hide in the body. The HIV/AIDS pandemic requires a sustained multi-pronged global effort to eliminate the disease. Only research and education will lead to the prevention strategies, drugs and vaccine that are needed to defeat this modern day plague.

In 2004, the Government of Canada committed to accelerating Canadian efforts to end HIV/AIDS by doubling its investment in the Federal Initiative to Address HIV/AIDS in Canada to \$84 million/year by 2008. A quarter of this funding is devoted to research, carried out by our universities, hospitals and community based organizations, and administered through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). This is in addition to the \$8 million per year already allocated to HIV/AIDS research by CIHR. CIHR is funding a wide range of projects, from the Canadian HIV Clinical Trials Network in Vancouver to the work of Dr Frank Plummer in Winnipeg.

Dr Plummer and his colleagues were awarded a grant from the Grand Challenges in Global Health initiative, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, in partnership with CIHR and others. His group has identified women who appear to be naturally resistant to HIV despite frequent exposure to the virus. This research may be central to the identification and development of future HIV vaccines. Now, the Gates Foundation has committed an additional \$300 million to further HIV research and address key research gaps identified by the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise.

If the world is to prevent the spread of HIV and improve the lives of those infected, research public awareness and partnership are the keys. ☞

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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada. Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.  
Email: [islandtides@islandtides.com](mailto:islandtides@islandtides.com). Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>