

The challenge of HIV/AIDS: thinking further ahead.

Summary Report

Our July 2005 Cumberland Lodge Conference had the title: 'The challenge of HIV/AIDS: thinking further ahead', and was organised in partnership with the 21st Century Trust. We intended the event to be for 25 professionals from around the world, aged between 25 – 40 years old. In addition to our invited speakers, we benefited from the expertise of Shereen El Feki, Healthcare Correspondent, *The Economist* and Robin Gorna, Team Leader, AIDS Team, DFID, who had helped us to plan the event, and were both able to attend throughout.

At the start of the conference we all had a chance to introduce ourselves. Robin began by saying that when she had finished reading Theology at Oxford she wrote down a huge list of possible careers for herself, but was not sure what to do next. The death of a gay friend, not from AIDS, but in a car accident, somehow settled the question: Robin decided she would work unpaid, for a year, with the Terrence Higgins Trust. This was the start of a 20-year career working on AIDS policy and strategy in the UK, Australia and with the European Commission. It is important, Robin said, for us to talk about sex and death, and we must keep talking. The conference made me realise the enormity of the problem posed by HIV/AIDS. Instead of a quick resolution to a life-threatening epidemic, as we achieved with the outbreak of SARS, the problem of HIV/AIDS is getting worse, spreading more widely, crippling societies and economies. And yet it is also true that we have the money, resources and knowledge to address the problem. So why aren't we getting it right? Robin said we need to talk about sex and death because we need to overcome stigma, prejudice, denial and superstition. We also need to talk about sex and death because it is a fact that people from different cultures understand the meaning and value of these differently: a society that is risk averse has a very different understanding of death to one that is disaster prone.

Of course the issue of HIV/AIDS also poses critical questions about healthcare infrastructure, governance, gender inequality, security

and the role of religion. The conference speakers explored also these themes in depth and with expertise.