Carry On, MP

Elected officials rarely walk the walk when it comes to AIDS. Doug Ireland had to jump the pond and cross the equator to find two who do—personally and politically.

December 1, 2000 By Doug Ireland

When TV satirist Michael Moore announced he was going to run a ficus plant for Congress, it got a bitter chuckle from many in the AIDS community who have little but contempt for the overwhelming majority of mediocre time-servers in the "people's house" and their disengagement from the struggle against HIV. Can you imagine your rep doing anything as proactive as becoming a guinea pig for an experimental HIV vaccine?

That's just what happened August 31 in Britain when Liberal Democratic Party Member of Parliament Evan Harris—a 35–year–old physician representing Oxford West and Abingdon—became the first person to take part in clinical trials of a vaccine that, if successful, could prevent millions of infections in Africa. After a rigorous screening, Harris (along with 17 healthy others with low risk of HIV infection) got his first vaccination. And he made his participation public.

Asked what moved him to take such a step, Harris says, "When I came to Oxford as a medical student in 1985, I joined OXAIDS, an AIDS hotline, manning the phones and giving talks about safe sex." He did a four-month residency in a ward that treated HIV and hemophilia: "In the West it's very unusual for a young doctor to see people of his own age dying of a disease," he says.

Harris' concern with AIDS continued after he was elected an MP in 1997. "I joined the All-Party Parlia-mentary Group on AIDS, which has 50 or so members, of whom 10 are active," he says. "I also sat on the research-and-ethics committee at Oxford University as an MD and MP. When the All-Party Group visited the Oxford lab, they told us of this work on a vaccine, based on studies of Nairobi prostitutes who appeared to be immune to HIV. I spoke to them about it privately and volunteered, and they came back a few months later after I was screened and asked if they could make my participation public. I hadn't anticipated that it would be a big media story."

His action has done more than make headlines. "In the UK, lots of citizens have come forward to volunteer for the trials because of Evan Harris' public act of altruism," says Victor Zonana of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI), the trial's sponsor. But Harris is modest: "The only heroes are the scientists working on this project—it is unlikely that there will be any side effects and there is no danger of it giving me HIV."

That Western scientists are experimenting on a British politician for the benefit of the developing world, Harris points out, “is a timely role reversal—usually it’s the other way round.” He adds, “It’s precisely because the pharmaceutical companies see no prospect of any return on investment in a vaccine that admirable groups like IAVI have stepped in to do this work.”

Harris believes that “politicians, even progressive ones, have been too silent on AIDS.” As the heterosexual president of Liberal Democrats for Lesbian and Gay Action for Equality, he says that “sex education has been downgraded because of the religious right,” calling Prime Minister Tony Blair “spineless for not standing up to the right-wing press campaign against condoms in schools.”

Few pols match Harris’ personal boldness. South Africa’s Patricia De Lille—one of three MPs from the Pan African Congress and a feisty AIDS advocate—publicly took an HIV test last May and called on other pols to do the same. “My hope was to get President Mbeki to do it,” she says. “We need to lead by example because there is such stigma attached to HIV here.” Only three MPs followed suit. Here in the U.S., only one member of Congress, ultraconservative Rep. Tom Coburn (R-OK), has tested publicly—but critics say only to advance his drive for mandatory names reporting.

Evan Harris’ selfless action shames our own ficus plants on the Hill. Healthy vaccine trial volunteers—even members of Congress—are needed. Contact IAVI (212.847.1111 or www.iavi.org).

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