Trench Warfare

September 25, 2012 By Regan Hofmann

The key message I hoped to hear at the XIX International AIDS Conference in Washington, DC, did in fact ring through loud and clear: Since we can begin to end AIDS, we must do so. Almost every key speaker referenced the possibility of an AIDS-free generation or the end of AIDS.

The devil, of course, is in the details of how we implement the tools and knowledge in our possession to make what's possible a reality. Ending AIDS won't be easy or cheap, and it won't happen overnight. Some criticized the convention's optimistic rhetoric and asked exactly how we would better battle the beast of AIDS. They are right to highlight the challenges and call for specific blueprints. But the importance of so many leaders collectively acknowledging that AIDS can be ended while pledging to do their part should not be minimized. You can't win a war you're currently losing unless you shift the battle plan, nor can you attain victory without the buy-in of leadership.

There is a scene in one of my favorite movies, *Gallipoli*, in which a runner in the trenches of WWI has to carry orders to a general to change the battle plan. The order will save his friend who is fighting on the front lines. The runner was a champion sprinter before the war, and as he prepares to dash through the battlefield, he recalls the exchange he and his coach would have before each race. Coach: "What are your legs?" Runner: "Steel springs." Coach: "What are they gonna do?" Runner: "Hurl me down the track." Coach: "How fast are you going to run?" Runner: "As fast as a leopard." Coach: "Then let's see you do it." Tapping all his talent, the runner races to get the orders to the general, hurdling through muddy trenches, weaving through showers of bullets. He delivers the orders, but not before his friend is shot. However, because the runner reached the general, the battle shifts and many lives are spared.

There's a lesson in that scene we should apply to fighting HIV/AIDS. A new battle plan must be delivered as quickly as possible, because the way we've been fighting this war isn't working. And the faster we can implement changes based on the empirical evidence we now have about what works, the faster we will spare more lives.

At the end of the conference, I went to the White House reception hosted by President Obama. It was reassuring to hear his commitment to ending the suffering caused by HIV. That said, his inspiring words mean little unless budgets and policies and health care reform are implemented in ways that enable us to better address the problem. (You can help by voting for Obama on November 6.)

Every now and then, I have doubts about whether AIDS will ever end. Such a thought flowed through my head at the White House, but then Patricia Nalls of the Women's Collective walked up and placed a scarf around my neck. It said, simply, "We can end AIDS." I burst into tears because I knew she was right. We can do it if each of us continues to find the courage and energy to keep running through the trenches as fast as we can, and if we prop up others when their belief falters.

Only history will answer whether or not AIDS actually ends. But when we feel like letting up, we should propel ourselves onward with the knowledge that the harder and faster we run, the more lives we will protect.

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