President Nader

Going Green in campaign 2000, Doug Ireland casts his vote for AIDS drug access, same-sex marriage and the uncynical.

May 1, 2000 By Doug Ireland

Four years ago, Ralph Nader—the longtime advocate for consumers, workers and the environment—offered himself up to the Green Party as its presidential candidate in a handful of states, and even though he made only a few token appearances and spent just $5,000, he managed to rack up a million votes. This year, Nader hopes to be on the ballot in 45 states as the candidate of the Greens, who are mounting their first full-scale national campaign. His goal is to garner the 5 percent of the vote the party needs to get Federal Election Commission matching funds and become a permanent part of the national political discourse. (For more information, call 202.296.1600, or click on www.votenader.org.)

Nader is the only postulant for the White House to advance a comprehensive program for access both here and abroad to anti-HIV drugs and other lifesaving meds. “We should take all drugs developed with taxpayer dollars—that includes most AIDS drugs, on which the drug companies are getting windfall profits—and put price restraints on them,” Nader told POZ in an exclusive interview. “And instead of giving a monopoly on these drugs to just one company, multiple licenses should be issued to any company that wants to sell them. That would create competition and bring down prices.”

Moreover, Nader said, “If there’s any opposition by the drug companies to this, government should say to them, ‘If you’re going to engage in profiteering, we’ll make them ourselves—and more cheaply than you.’ There’s already a drug company over at the Defense Department that produces three out of four of the globally used antimalarial drugs. While the drug companies claim it costs them $300 to $500 million to develop each drug, the Pentagon does it for about $10 million per.” Nader added that the World Health Organization should be given licenses to produce at the most inexpensive prices possible the drugs the U.S. paid to develop.

Through the Consumer Project on Technology (CPT)—just one of the skein of public interest organizations that his fertile mind has conceived in the last three decades—Nader has been lobbying to make meds cheaply and globally available, long before this became a hot issue in the AIDS community. In fact, CPT provided a nonstop fountain of expertise in international trade law that informed the AIDS Drugs for Africa campaign and made it effective. As a next step, Nader said, “the U.S. could build a plant in Africa and for $300 million supply the whole continent” with

the top 10 lifesaving drugs. Nader is also the only candidate to campaign for “universal national health care from the cradle through the nursing home, with a single-payer system like Canada’s. In the U.S., 24 cents of every dollar spent on health care goes to administrative costs, but the Canadians spend only 11 cents. The difference could pay for covering the 47 million Americans who now have no health insurance.”

For HIVers, a critical component of Nader’s health plan is his strong emphasis on medical privacy and patient empowerment. “Patients have to be given the right to band together as consumers, to have watchdog offices with full-time staffs,” he said. “Focusing only on finance and not on quality, accessibility and empowerment does not deal with incompetence, mismanagement, discrimination and corporate domination of the health care system.” Nader also supports needle exchange, medical marijuana and “an intellectual property right to medical files,” including HIV status—“no right to refer, buy or rent without the consent of the owner, meaning the patient.”

Four years ago, when a reporter asked Nader if he supported the Greens’ platform favoring same-sex marriage—a key issue for gay HIVers—he flippantly replied that he wasn’t interested in “gonadal politics.” But in February Nader told *POZ* that the recent Vermont Supreme Court decision, which held that denying the rights and benefits of marriage to same-sex couples constitutes discrimination, “was right, a humane and touching decision with a very searching rationale—it’s not only a matter of affinity, but of economics on health care and other issues, which makes it all the more needed.”

Many HIVers, such as drug-access advocate David Scondras, the former Boston Democratic council member, believe that “it would be great if Nader could be president, but our collective self-interest tells us that Gore is better than the Republican—it’s always a choice of the lesser of two evils.” But ACT UP/New York’s Eric Sawyer argues that “Nader truly gets the humanity of the global AIDS crisis and, through the Nader family of organizations, is one of the real fighters on global AIDS.” AIDS activist Ann Northrop—who’ll be a featured speaker on AIDS at the Greens’ national convention in June—calls Nader’s “the only uncynical candidacy—it offers us a chance to express ourselves because he’s not part of the self-promoting, power-mongering two-party monopoly.”

Or, as a great labor leader once said, “It’s better to vote for what you want and not get it than to vote for what you don’t want and get it.” I’m voting Nader in November.

Editor’s note: Columnist Doug Ireland’s vote for Ralph Nader for president does not represent the official endorsement of POZ.

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