Uh-Oh, Canada

Sun to set on National AIDS Strategy?

March 1, 1997 By Walter Armstrong and Ronnilyn Pustil

Activists dumped a slew of empty pill bottles on the office steps of a Toronto member of Parliament on World AIDS Day. No, the protest wasn't about recycling. It was about the government's plan to dismantle its National AIDS Strategy (NAS). AIDS Action Now!'s Tim McCaskell said, "These empty pill bottles are as useless to us as empty promises. For the people living in Canada, this is a day of shame." As *POZ* went to press, the health minister had made no commitment to renew the NAS-a 10-year project funding prevention, research and virtually every other epidemic-related need-after it lapses on March 31, 1998.

The well for research has already run dry, with grave results. "The lack of an announcement of a renewal is having a devastating impact on research. As it stands, with no government commitment, independent AIDS research is grinding to a halt in Canada," said Louise Binder, chair of Voices of Positive Women.

Scientists are no more sanguine than activists. "The uncertainty has already taken a significant toll," said Dr. Mark Wainberg, director of the McGill University AIDS Center, whose lab was the first to identify 3TC as an anti-HIV agent-an event viewed as a NAS payoff. "We're a disabled country when it comes to the ability to implement long-term research studies, lab science and clinical trials." The prospect of shaking their tin cups at private donors to scare up funds does not encourage advocates. "AIDS isn't popular. It's not a big moneymaker, unless you're Glaxo Wellcome," said the Canadian AIDS Society's Russell Armstrong.

Former Health Minister Diane Marleau said the government would "sunset" the NAS. However, David Dingwall, when appointed health minister in January 1996, acknowledged that with more than 16,000 reported cases of AIDS, some 50,000 people with HIV and an estimated 4,000 new infections annually, Canada was in no position to treat the epidemic as a routine health problem. Dingwall has fulfilled promises to "consult with the HIV community" before the other shoe drops, but has so far made no promises for a renewal. He did not return phone calls from *POZ*.

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