

United States Senate

Senator Tom Coburn, MD

February 19, 2010

Julio Montaner, M.D.
Conference Chair
President, International AIDS Society
Director, BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Dear Dr. Montaner,

“With the goal of universal access by 2010 looming on the immediate horizon,” the stated objectives of the upcoming XVIII International AIDS Conference proclaim “there is a need for urgency and accountability and no room for complacency.”¹ These are very noble goals which I applaud.

Despite spending billions of dollars annually to support global HIV/AIDS initiatives, the challenges we face remain daunting. As many of 33.4 million people are already infected with HIV and another 2.7 million become infected each year. Yet only 4 million are currently being treated.² These numbers make our shared goal of universal access for everyone by 2010 seem to be near impossible. As a result, those with HIV seeking care are being turned away and others at risk, facing the despair of being denied treatment, are less inclined to be tested. Even in wealthier nations like the United States, too many patients are still not receiving proper AIDS care or treatment.

In the sense of urgency and accountability that are the goals of the International AIDS Society for AIDS 2010, I would urge prioritization of the resources that are available to target funds where they can best bring the hope of lifesaving treatment to as many of those affected by HIV as possible.

The overwhelming numbers in need underscore there truly is no room for complacency, which means we must ensure *every* cent we spend in the name of AIDS has an obvious benefit to the millions living with the disease and can be justified to each individual who is now being denied treatment.

While I recognize the International AIDS Conference can provide a unique forum for networking, reviewing scientific developments, and sharing information for many stakeholders, modern technology allows us to accomplish these goals for relatively little cost. While these alternatives may not include the museum and castle tours, the visit to Mozart’s birth place, or

¹ “Conference Objectives; AIDS 2010 in Context,” XVIII International AIDS Conference website, International AIDS Society, accessed February 2010, <http://www.aids2010.org/Default.aspx?pageId=219>.

² Michael Allen, “War on AIDS Hangs in Balance as U.S. Curbs Help for Africa,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703906204575027442437944112.html?mod=WSJ_latestheadlines.

wine tasting offered by the upcoming gathering in Vienna³, they can meet the main goals of the conference.

There are, however, no lifesaving alternatives to medicine and hosting this extravagant conference will siphon tens of millions of dollars away from the front lines where lives are literally lost or saved. Consider that the cost to send the expected 25,000 attendees to the conference⁴ for a few days would be more than enough to keep as many families impacted by HIV healthy for an entire year! The millions of dollars spent to put on the actual conference could pay for doctors, nurses, prevention services, and treatment for thousands of others who otherwise may be abandoned.

As a practicing physician who has cared for patients living with HIV for 25 years, I would urge you to cancel the XVIII International AIDS Conference scheduled for July and redirect the budget for the gathering towards lifesaving AIDS care and treatment and encourage those who plan to attend to do the same. There will be numerous other AIDS conferences, gatherings, and meetings throughout this year and next, but for millions living with HIV there will not be many other opportunities for lifesaving medication.

I know this is a difficult decision and I thank you for your consideration and for your advocacy on behalf of those affected by HIV/AIDS.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Coburn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "T".

Tom A. Coburn, M.D.
U.S. Senator

³ "Tour Descriptions," XVIII International AIDS Conference website, International AIDS Society, accessed February 2010, <http://www.aids2010.org/Default.aspx?pageId=254>.

⁴ XVIII International AIDS Conference website, International AIDS Society, accessed February 2010, <http://www.aids2010.org/Default.aspx?pageId=223>.