

U.S. Representative Barbara Lee: The Caucus Interview

By Peter Taback, San Francisco AIDS Foundation

Once again, Representative Barbara Lee (D- CA) is the sole member of the U.S. Congress to attend the International AIDS Conference. On Tuesday, the Caucus Newsletter caught up with her to learn how her involvement builds progressive momentum globally and in the U.S.

“I saw that there was a void when I went to Congress, so I started participating [in the IAC] to get a good handle on what strategies and what policies the United States should mount.”

Hers is a simple operating plan. Rep. Lee connects the House of Representatives to major themes of the epidemic, building bipartisan support for critical issues such as comprehensive sex education, family planning, and the U.S. HIV-related travel and immigration ban, whose statutory repeal she successfully engineered in the new PEPFAR bill. (The Department of Health and Human Services must now act to fully lift the bar.)

“When I was in Toronto, it dawned on me that we should have one of these great conferences in my district in Oakland. Then someone reminded me, ‘you can’t do that Barbara, there’s a travel ban.’ So I went back to Congress, wrote and introduced a resolution that would lift the travel ban. I’m proud to say that in the PEPFAR bill that President Bush signed into law, the travel ban was repealed. Now we need to implement the regulations.”

However, support for family planning is absent from PEPFAR II—a painful irony in the city that gave the global gag rule the name “Mexico City Policy.”

“It’s absolutely essential that we have

coordination between HIV and AIDS initiatives and family planning,” Lee said. “I want to repeal the Global Gag Rule that does not allow organizations to receive federal funding to provide full reproductive health counseling, including abortion counseling. It is a shame and disgrace and does a disservice to women, harming millions of women throughout the world.”

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Domestically, Rep. Lee is aghast at infection rates in the African-American community including those in her Oakland, California district. She laments Congress’s failure to adequately fund the Minority AIDS Initiative and was not surprised at the CDC’s revised surveillance figures or the recent Black AIDS Institute (BAI) report, “Left Behind.”

“There’s been a severe undercount. The

Black AIDS Institute knew this, I knew this, members of Congress knew this. BAI is calling for a domestic PEPFAR and I fully agree with them. They want 1.3 billion to begin. I think we need billions and billions and billions more.”

Of course, to be effective, that level of funding will require another sweeping policy change, an end to the abstinence-only-until-marriage programs favored by the administration.

“The Responsible Education about Life [REAL] Act, be for REAL, that’s my bill, has more than 100 co-sponsors. That bill would in essence allow states to use federal funding to teach comprehensive sex education in public schools, to teach young people how to prevent the transmission of HIV and AIDS and also how to prevent unwanted pregnancies. It’s got to happen.”

“Hopefully with a new president we’ll be able to push that policy forward.”

To hear the entire interview with Rep. Barbara Lee, visit the San Francisco AIDS Foundation’s podcast at www.sfaf.org.



“Microbicides and Vaccines”: Moving Forward

By Deborah Baron, Microbicides Media and Communications Initiative

When the moderator, Mitchell Warren, asked the distinguished panel of the special session what keeps them up at night, most echoed the fear that HIV prevent research is not moving fast enough to meet the urgent need for new methods. Yet Tachi Yamada, president of Global Health Program at Gates Foundation, doesn't attribute his insomnia to the challenges facing the field. Instead, his excitement keeps him awake, as he dwells on the possible scientific solutions that will help lead to a day without HIV.

The session, “*Microbicides and Vaccines: Where do we go from here?*,” offered a reflective look on recent HIV prevention trial closures, and focused on lessons learned and tangible steps forward. Yamada told the crowd of 1500 -1600 people that “failures are only a momentary setback on the road to success.” The panel included Alan Bernstein

(HIV Vaccine Enterprise), Seth Berkeley (International AIDS Vaccine Initiative), Susan Buchbinder (San Francisco Department of Public Health), Zeda Rosenberg (International Partnership for Microbicides), Manju Chtani (African Microbicides Advocacy Group) and Pedro Goicochea, (Gladstone Institute).

They agreed that innovative breakthroughs in microbicide and vaccine research will require huge investment of financial and human resources. Alan Bernstein stressed the need to mentor young investigators whose fresh minds offer the best chance for bringing new ideas to the table and discovering an effective vaccine. Panelists also emphasized the impor-

tance of transparency and building trust with trial participants and communities.

Advocates and trial participants play increasingly consultative roles in trial design and implementation, but trust between researchers and communities can still be fragile. “We can't guarantee a [positive] answer to the research we undertake,” said Susan Buchbinder, “but we can guarantee clear communication about the answer.”

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As advocates and researchers stay committed to the long haul, they hope communities and the wider world will travel the road with them. As Manju Chatani noted, “We have to keep the hope alive without over-selling products.” It is only through commitment to the research process that we will find new effective products.

“Microbicides and Vaccines”: Long Road to Success

By Cindra Feuer, AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition

“Failure informs future success.” The HIV vaccine and microbicide researchers who took to the stage on Monday to discuss the future of these experimental HIV prevention technologies repeated this mantra throughout the symposium.

The halted STEP vaccine study perhaps best illustrates this point. Last year an interim analysis showed Merck's Ad-5 vaccine was ineffective and may have even enhanced risk of HIV infection. But Susan Buchbinder, a STEP investigator, emphasized the valuable lessons learned from the study: that the test-of-concept trial (Phase IIb) can provide quick answers, and that the non-human primate model must be recalibrated to better understand its applicability. In addition, a wealth of data emerged, even leads on potential immune correlates.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, undaunted by the apparent setbacks, recently implemented its Grand Challenges Explorations, a \$US 100 million initiative to encourage bold and unconventional science. The panelists emphasized the

need for such science to move forward in vaccine discovery, citing truly novel ideas including reducing, not enhancing an immune response, promoting more mutations, and using replicating viral vectors for vaccine delivery.

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Tachi Yamada

Although no stranger to setbacks, Zeda Rosenberg, from the International Partnership for Microbicides, spoke of the optimism around ARV-containing candidates. This new generation of microbicides may be more potent than its predecessor because of its known anti-HIV properties. Some microbicides containing combination ARVs, could offer multi-mechanism protection.

Past “failed” trials did reveal the challenge of consistent use of the microbicide. The next generation of microbicides will provide longer protection, making adherence easier.

“Nine out of 10 drugs or vaccines end with failures,” said Tachi Yamada of the Gates Foundation. “Success is about long-term investment, not about today or tomorrow, but sometime in our lifetime.”