

January 2020

St Vincent's HIV Future Fund Ambassador 2019 Report



Message from A/Prof Anthony Schembri AM
CEO, St Vincent's Health Network Sydney



'Every Journey Counts' was the theme of World AIDS Day 2019. This provided a timely opportunity to reflect on the journey of St Vincent's over 35 years of treating and caring for people with HIV/AIDS.

What a journey it has been. Australia's first AIDS patient was diagnosed in 1983. Australia's first dedicated AIDS ward - Ward 17 South – opened at St Vincent's Hospital in the following year. Ward 17 South was ground zero for the AIDS epidemic in Sydney. The courage and commitment of staff, however, was campus-wide.

I was 22 years old, working on Ward 17 South with other young staff, caring for patients from my community. One recollection is that on a particularly painful day - I was in the nurses' station having a little cry, and Sr Margaret came and put her arm around me. I said "*Sister I don't think I can do this anymore*". And she said "*It's because it's hard that we should do it.*" And I think - if not for St Vincent's then who? If not for the Sisters, Charles Curran, Ron Penny, David Cooper, Phil Cunningham ... if not for them, who would do this? ... I remember my first patient. He had pneumocystis pneumonia - at the time it was one of the main AIDS-defining illnesses. His family had refused to have anything to do with him. He was under the care of David Cooper and David said "*We won't let you die alone*".

HIV Treatments 2020

More and better testing, and simpler treatments, means that fewer people develop AIDS - and die from it. Despite this the number of Australians living with HIV continues to rise. HIV research and treatment is always evolving and we foresee a time when medication could be given less frequently. HIV medication is now such a simple, safe option that many HIV-positive young people don't realise they are standing on the shoulders of those who went before them. The shoulders of patients and staff who through their bravery, gave us the opportunity to understand how the virus works, how and when to treat it, what drugs work best, and how to manage treatment complications.

St Vincent's Patient-Centred Care

St Vincent's Hospital continues to see and treat patients with a wide range of HIV/AIDS related health disorders. This includes people with AIDS defining illnesses who have never been diagnosed; people who know their status and have been on treatment but decide to stop and then get sick; people who can't access anti-retroviral therapies because they're without Medicare; people from small towns who don't want their communities or even their GP to know they have HIV. All people who still today need the courage and compassion of St Vincent's to care for them.

St Vincent's also treats patients with complications from anti-retroviral treatment, such as accelerated cardiovascular disease, or who have anal cancer and other illnesses from a damaged immune system. The immunology team is often sent patients who are newly diagnosed, perhaps by GPs who, increasingly, know little about HIV.

St Vincent's Darlinghurst campus has the largest HIV lab in Australia, providing rapid and comprehensive diagnostic point of care testing in the community.

PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) - an anti-retroviral taken by HIV negative people to prevent infection - has played a vital role in efforts to end HIV. St Vincent's provides free PrEP to approximately 200 high-risk patients who are least able to pay or to negotiate the healthcare system. These are mostly gay men, but recently the Immunology team received news of a healthy baby born to a serodiscordant (i.e. one partner has HIV and the other does not) couple. Clinicians supported the couple to ensure the HIV-infected husband adhered to his medication regime, and that the wife was taking PrEP at the time of conception.

Thanks to your support St Vincent's can provide free anti-retrovirals, hospital care, pathology, imaging, medication to help people with HIV tolerate their HIV treatments, and PrEP.



*“from the beginning the Sisters, the board and the staff showed great courage in saying to the world that **St Vincent's would be a place where people with HIV will feel welcomed, safe, and valued.** That courage and compassion have been the defining characteristics of St Vincent's.”*