



World AIDS Day 2011 encourages global action on December 1

The theme of this year's World AIDS Day – December 1 – is *Do Something*.

Since 1988, HIV/AIDS activists have observed World AIDS Day by raising public awareness through research and education, fundraising initiatives, and anti-prejudice campaigns. The red ribbon became an international symbol of HIV/AIDS support and a commitment to finding a cure for the virus that's killed millions of people around the world.

It's a day for nations to review international statistics, current issues and trends, rates of infection, innovative treatments, research funding, and prevention.

And December 1 is also a day to remember those who have died from the disease. Throughout the world, candlelight vigils are traditionally held to mourn the lives of those lost and to reaffirm government leaders' commitment to continue funding for research, prevention, treatment and resources for those already inflicted by the virus that became widely known in the 1980s, particularly in North America, when actor Rock Hudson and pianist Liberace both died from it.

It was 30 years ago that the first case of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) – the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) – was documented. Scientists believe humans contracted HIV from chimpanzees in West Africa when they hunted them for meat and were exposed to their blood. These chimpanzees carried the simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV), which mutated in humans to become HIV. The virus gradually spread across Africa and then other parts of the world. HIV/AIDS reached epidemic proportions in the 1980s – spreading fear and prejudice.

The face of HIV and AIDS has changed over the decades. Initially labeled the “gay men's cancer” as HIV largely inflicted homosexual men, it soon became commonplace among injection drug-users and hemophiliacs receiving contaminated blood-products and transfusions. It soon spread to women and children – babies were often infected through their mother's breast milk or in utero. And even senior citizens have been infected with HIV.

According to UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS), there are currently 33.3 million people living with HIV in the world, including 2.5 million children and 52 per cent of them are women and girls. During 2009, there were a reported 2.6 million new HIV diagnoses, and an estimated 1.8 million deaths from AIDS.

In Canada, UNAIDS reports 67,000 Canadians are living with HIV, including 14,000 women.

For more information, visit Positive Living Society of British Columbia (formerly British Columbia Persons with AIDS Society; BCPWA) at <http://www.positivelivingbc.org/>.

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