

WHO AIDS Program: Moving on a New Track

The program has changed since Jon Mann left—and the verdict is out on whether it's been a constructive upheaval

Geneva—TWO WEEKS AGO—AND THOUSANDS of miles away from here—executives of the Switzerland-based World Health Organization (WHO) delivered some bad news to a group of financial and political leaders attending a World Bank-sponsored meeting on AIDS in Bangkok, Thailand. According to the latest projections from WHO's Global Program on AIDS (GPA), the rate of new HIV infections in Asia is rising at a dramatic rate—so fast, in fact, that even though the disease was virtually unknown on that continent only a few years ago, by the end of this decade more Asians than Africans are expected to become infected each year.

Bringing the latest projections on the AIDS pandemic to the leaders of the World Bank is typical of the extremely important work the GPA has been doing since its inception in 1986. The organization, under the leadership of its first director, Jonathan Mann, was a catalyst in informing the world of the dangers of AIDS and getting in motion programs meant to slow, if not stop, the progress of infection around the world. Today, the organization is doubly important, because AIDS has begun to slip off the front pages of the world's leading newspapers. And yet in the past 18 months, GPA has been going through an upheaval that critics say could diminish its impact just when it's needed most.

The turmoil was brought on by the abrupt resignation of Mann in March of last year (*Science*, 15 June 1990, p. 1306) and his replacement by long-time WHO insider Michael H. Merson. Since then GPA has seen an exodus of senior staff, a declining budget, and bureaucratic retrenchment. Critics lay these problems at the feet of Merson, who, they say, lacks Mann's vision. But Merson has his defenders, who say he is just what the AIDS program needs as it matures: a feet-on-the-ground leader who knows how to sustain a program within a bureaucracy like WHO. It's too early to say who's right on this one, but the outcome could have a key effect on the entire global fight against AIDS.

Although there is disagreement over the current direction of the program, everyone agrees on one thing: Mann and Merson are very different leaders. By all accounts Mann, who was formerly state health commissioner

in New Mexico, was a charismatic and dynamic director who could wow an audience of skeptics and inspire great loyalty among his staff. He started at WHO with only a secretary and wound up with the largest single program at WHO and a staff of almost 200.

From the start, Mann's style ran counter to that of the staid, bureaucratic WHO. This was evident in a wide variety of ways. He liked to hire people who fit his mold rather than the organization's—outsiders who shared his zeal for direct action on the AIDS pandemic. Further, Mann championed a nontraditional public health approach to AIDS, emphasizing

mantling of the most important elements of the program, both from a programmatic aspect and from a philosophic aspect." Rather than do that, Mann left Geneva for Harvard University's school of public health.

After Mann resigned, Nakajima named Merson who, unlike Mann, is a product of the WHO team, having spent 12 years there, first in the Acute Respiratory Infections Control Program and then managing the Diarrheal Disease Control Program where he coordinated the successful oral rehydration strategy to stem the rising number of deaths due to diarrhea in children. But if he was more acceptable to WHO's establishment, he was hard for Mann's handpicked team to swallow. After 4 years of the outspoken Mann, many at GPA were unprepared for Merson. "Mike's management style is 180 degrees around from Jon's," says a senior official in the U.S. AIDS program. "I'd say Jon is a leader, Mike is a manager." Perhaps so, but he couldn't manage to keep many of Mann's top deputies who either left on their own or felt they were forced out.



The old team. Jonathan Mann (first row, fourth from right) and his team at WHO. Mann himself left in March 1990; only four members of his team remain.

ing human rights in all strategies to combat the disease, and an emphasis on behavioral approaches for preventing infection, rather than simply distributing condoms, for example. And Mann takes credit for steering WHO toward the previously uncharted waters of supporting non-governmental health organizations, such as Street Kids International, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and the Names Project.

Despite his radicalism, Mann enjoyed the support of WHO officials for years. His budgets grew like topsy—from \$20 million in 1986 to \$90 million in 1990. But by early 1990, it was clear that Mann was setting a pace that was too fast for his bosses. WHO Director-General Hiroshi Nakajima ordered GPA's budget cut, and he put the program on more equal footing with other WHO projects. "It became crystal clear to me," says Mann, "that to remain in the program would be to preside over the dis-

In replacing them, Merson took the opposite tack from Mann: He chose people who were used to WHO's bureaucratic ways but didn't have experience on AIDS. Susan Holck, chief of the planning and policy coordination office, has been in Geneva for 10 years, most of that time working in the reproductive health program. Deputy director Dorothy Blake had been heading up a regional Caribbean program for WHO, and Karen Edström, director of the office of cooperation with national programs, had been WHO's representative in Sri Lanka since 1987.

Those who survive from the Mann era complain that the changes have clogged the organization's arteries. They grumble that they must seek clearance before they can circulate memos or send faxes, something that infuriates people who were more comfortable in the free-wheeling days before Merson's arrival. One former GPA staff mem-

ber tells the story of a computer disk that arrived at GPA with a computer virus on it. The virus was quickly discovered, and a memo was prepared to warn other staff members not to use the disk. But it took so long to get the memo approved that the virus spread throughout GPA's computers.

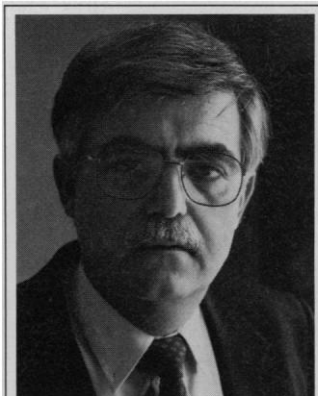
Some outsiders are more charitable, however, seeing increased structure as a necessary step in an organization's evolution. Ronald St. John, deputy director of the National AIDS Program Office in the Department of Health and Human Services, thinks GPA had reached a stage where it needed someone with more organizational skill to take over. "It's just like someone starting up a new business," he says. "You begin to reach a different level of maturity, and a new style is called for. When you're working with 5 or 6 people in your back yard, that's one style—everybody is informal. But when you get up to 200 people, things have to get more formal and get more organized."

But beyond the debate over management styles lie much more important questions for the fight against AIDS: What overall direction is Merson taking the program and is that a necessary new direction or a surrender to bureaucratic imperatives? On that question, there is considerable difference of opinion. Merson and his defenders argue that the program is on track, vigorously pursuing an extension of the agenda Mann set for it. But critics, including Mann, argue that Merson and WHO are trying to make AIDS into just another disease of the developing world, rather than the global problem they believe it to be.

Consider Merson's view of the spread of the virus: "One of the big changes in the pandemic that I am trying to respond to is the clear developing country predominance," he said in a recent interview in his office. Merson has been taking his message to countries where the virus has not yet taken hold. "What I am trying to get them to understand is that if they wait for [AIDS] cases, it's too darn late," he says.

Mann argues that this approach, while certainly justified by the preponderance of new cases of HIV-infection emerging from the developing world, creates a false sense of security about the pandemic. "It's another level of denial that this is a global problem," says Mann. It "put[s] the problem far away, and in a sense declares premature victory in some parts of the world, like the industrialized world."

On a different plane—that of the human rights controversies spawned by the AIDS pandemic—Mann and Merson seem at first glance to be in agreement. Mann has consistently stressed that AIDS is a disease largely brought on by human behavior, and that infected individuals were subject to discrimination for behaving "badly." As a consequence, he has argued that to combat the disease in an effective manner, human rights issues have to be a priority. Merson says that GPA still takes that approach. For example, GPA will not financially support, co-sponsor, or attend any meetings in countries that restrict the immigration of infected individuals. Merson has ap-



Dr. Michael H. Merson

plied that formula to the United States, which still has such restrictions, and GPA scientists were notably absent from a meeting last week on a global vaccine strategy sponsored by the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

But one former GPA official who spoke on condition of anonymity says that the commitment to human rights has waned: "It's there in the words, but not in the gut feeling." The former staffer points out that GPA is still conducting business with Japan, a country where there have been reports of de facto discrimination even if laws may not strictly forbid infected individuals from entering the country.

Then there's the ultimate strategic question: how to identify effective approaches to

slowing the spread of the virus. Gary Slutkin, acting chief, Office of Intervention, Development and Support and a holdover from the Mann era, says Merson is doing a good job of defining the interventions that will have the most impact. "The next couple of years, [GPA] will be pressing on two or three or four specific approaches," Slutkin says. He means that Merson can be expected to pursue a strategy he has used effectively in his past endeavors—heavily promoting relatively simple treatment options. For the diarrheal disease program, the oral rehydration salts package fit the bill. For the respiratory disease program, antibiotics were effective. For AIDS the answer may be a combination of encouraging condom use, targeted education programs, and greater attention to treatment of sexually transmitted diseases. But critics say that in his zeal to pursue technological fixes like condoms, Merson has given short shrift to the behavioral component to the disease. Recent budgets for behavioral research have plummeted.

Clearly, GPA has entered a new phase. The program has always had relatively meager resources—in its heyday budgets barely reached \$90 million—and next year Merson is expecting to operate on \$75 million. (The U.S. Agency for International Development alone will spend \$70 million on its bilateral AIDS efforts this year.) But GPA is still the agency countries turn to when they need guidance in dealing with HIV infection. Mann believes WHO, with its global infrastructure, can play an incredibly effective role in combating the AIDS pandemic. "WHO has tremendous latent potential," says Mann. It will be Merson's challenge to tap that potential. ■ JOSEPH PALCA

Rockefeller's \$20 Million Gift

David Baltimore, the embattled president of Rockefeller University, received a dramatic show of support last week from David Rockefeller, chairman of the executive committee of the university's board of trustees. Rockefeller donated \$20 million to the university, the largest gift from a single individual in the institution's history. Rockefeller—whose grandfather, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., founded the university in 1901—subsequently told *The New York Times* that his donation should be seen as an expression of his confidence in Baltimore's leadership of the university.

The donation came at an opportune time for Baltimore. His appointment last year was opposed by some prominent Rockefeller faculty members who were upset by his handling of charges of misconduct that had

been leveled against Thereza Imanishi-Kari in connection with a paper she had co-authored with Baltimore. In recent weeks, two of Baltimore's critics, aging-researcher Anthony Cermai and neurobiologist Gerald Edelman, left the university and took their research groups with them, leading to speculation that all is not well at Rockefeller University (*Science*, 11 October, p. 186).

David Rockefeller's gift may, however, help quell one major concern: that the controversy surrounding Baltimore would seriously damage fund-raising. The university announced last week that the donation capped the most successful fund-raising period in Rockefeller's history with gifts and pledges totaling \$40.4 million since Baltimore took over. The goal is to raise \$250 million in the 1990s. ■ C.N.