



## **PRIME MINISTER**

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP  
HANDOVER OF THE EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL HIV/AIDS  
STRATEGY, PARLIAMENT HOUSE  
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**\*\* CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY \*\***

On your behalf, and on behalf of the Commonwealth, I would like to thank Professor Feachem for the outstanding work he has done in preparing this Evaluation of the National HIV/AIDS Strategy.

Professor Feachem has been assisted in his work by dedicated officers of the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, who also deserve our thanks.

After more than a decade of intensive policy-making, and the completion of two national HIV/AIDS strategies, it is very useful to have an expert and knowledgeable outsider critically assess our achievements and our shortcomings.

An independent evaluation is vital if public confidence is to be maintained in the essential principles of the national HIV/AIDS policy. And as Chief Health Adviser to the World Bank, Professor Feachem is well qualified to provide an assessment.

In preparing his Evaluation, Professor Feachem has travelled extensively and consulted widely.

Many of the groups and organisations with whom Professor Feachem has reviewed Australia's HIV/AIDS policies are represented here today.

There are representatives of the State and Federal political parties, senior State and Federal bureaucrats, health professionals, academics, indigenous Australians, the State and Territory AIDS Councils and the Commonwealth's formal HIV/AIDS advisory bodies.

Professor Feachem's report brings to the Government all your views. It brings the views of the Haemophilia Foundation Australia, and the bodies grouped around the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations - the National Association of People Living With HIV/AIDS, the Scarlet Alliance, the Australian IV League.

The views of Australians living with HIV/AIDS are perhaps the most important of all - because they are, in all senses, closest to the daily challenges of the epidemic.

Since 1982, their strong and distinctive voices of people have helped shape our national HIV/AIDS policies.

People living with HIV/AIDS could be excused for concentrating solely on personal and family concerns.

But they haven't. Over the past decade, people with HIV/AIDS have transcended their circumstances, and the daily burden of coping with the virus, to make often outstanding contributions to our HIV/AIDS policies - not to mention the general life of the nation.

We can learn something from their bravery. And even as we show our support *for them*, we can derive strength *from them*.

As Professor Feachem has outlined this morning, Australia's response to HIV/AIDS is recognised as being amongst the best in the world.

A decade of hard and unremitting effort in this country has resulted in a welcome reduction in the rates of incidence of both HIV and AIDS.

In per capita terms, we are in a much better position regarding HIV infection than, for example, Canada, France, the United States, Spain and Switzerland.

And as we look to the future Australia also seems to have passed the peak incidence of AIDS infection, while the United Kingdom and the United States appear to be experiencing continuing increases.

So we can be quietly pleased to have done relatively well in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

However, while ever the virus is amongst us, there can be no room for self-satisfaction or complacency.

There are presently some 14,700 people living with HIV/AIDS. And a much larger number know people - and love people - afflicted with the virus.

People living with HIV/AIDS are members of the Australian family.

They are workers in factories and players in orchestras. They are teachers in schools and students in universities; they are clerks and journalists and artists and labourers and lawyers. They are fathers and sons and brothers.

We enjoy and profit from the things they create.

HIV/AIDS affects us all - in our families, our workplaces and our communities. In a sense, we are all living with the virus.

HIV infection has cost Australia dearly - and not only in human terms.

In one year alone, 1992-93, the cost of providing treatment and care was \$130 million.

In the same year, the total indirect cost from earnings lost because of HIV/AIDS illness and death was estimated at \$313 million.

I am convinced the human and financial cost would have been even greater if not for the partnership which has been forged between governments, the medical, scientific and caring professions, and the affected communities.

Community involvement and consultation in decision-making has ensured that our actions have generally been well-founded, well-directed and well-executed.

Where delicate balances have had to be struck, we have always engaged the public in dialogue.

Some who were opposed to the shape of our policies claimed that, if the treatment of HIV/AIDS was to be met effectively, we had to choose to protect either general, or individual, rights. They believed that the protection of the community could only be ensured by imposing sanctions, controls and - ultimately - isolation upon those most at risk of HIV infection.

Our experience so far has demonstrated the opposite - the greater the protection we afford to individual rights and responsibilities, the greater the benefit to the entire Australian community.

At all times, the Commonwealth Government has acted in the firm belief that our paramount consideration must be the health and well being of the Australian people.

No sectional or political consideration has ever, or will ever, stand in the way of the Government taking whatever steps are necessary to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS.

However, our achievements to date - as recorded in the Evaluation Report - demonstrate that the best results are achieved by consultation, not coercion.

Within the Federal Parliament, the spirit of bipartisanship will, I trust, continue to guide the deliberations of the Parliamentary Liaison Group on AIDS.

This Group provides the best forum in which to resolve the differences that inevitably arise during the preparation of public education campaigns which involve the frank discussion of human behaviour.

Nevertheless, this Government will never shrink from the need to work with and through the communities most affected by this virus.

We owe this duty of care to our fellow citizens, and to our children.

As we look ahead, there is little prospect of the early development and distribution of effective vaccines or cures for HIV/AIDS, despite the welcome developments in combination treatments of HIV infection.

And there are some disturbing signs, including some in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

And, of course, every year sees the emergence of a new group of young Australians who may be exposed to risk of infection.

So we cannot lose our resolve, or drop our pace. It is clear to the Government that there remains an overwhelming need for a national HIV/AIDS strategy.

I am pleased to announce that, as recommended by Professor Feachem, the Commonwealth Government will support the establishment of a Third National HIV/AIDS Strategy, with dedicated, secure and adequate funding for five years.

As Professor Feachem has reported, the four key elements of the Strategy are:

education and prevention;

treatment and care;

research; and

international assistance and cooperation.

The detailed components of the Third National Strategy will be decided upon after consideration of the recommendations contained within the Evaluation, discussions between all governments, and consultation with non-government organisations and the general public.

These processes must be conducted responsibly - but also quickly.

The over-riding objectives of the Third National Strategy must be:

to care for those affected by HIV/AIDS;

to conduct further research into the nature of the virus and its transmission;

to redouble efforts to prevent new infections within the national territory of Australia; and

to assist in the international effort to contain the spread of the virus, particularly within the Asia-Pacific region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is tragic to think of the people Australia has lost to HIV/AIDS - and with those people, all of their energy and creativity and strength.

It is important to remember the lives we have lost.

But it is also important to remember the lives we have *saved* - through intelligent government policies and generous community cooperation.

I think Australians can derive some measure of pride from the way we have fought this virus. In the best Australian tradition, we have shown our belief in practical, constructive measures.

We have stuck together - as Australians.

And in that spirit we should go forward.

Thank you.