

Reception for the Northern Territory Aids and Hepatitis  
Council to launch Aids Awareness Week and to mark  
World AIDS Day

SPEECH by Her Honour

the Honourable Sally Thomas AM,  
Administrator of the Northern Territory  
Government House - 1 December 2011

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Mr Bill Patterson, President of the Northern Territory AIDS and Hepatitis Council, distinguished guests all, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Government House for this World AIDS Day 2011.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to host you for this event at Government House. I acknowledge the Larrakia people the traditional owners of the land on which we stand.

It is exciting for me to have so many of you here and to be able to express my appreciation to the individuals and organisations who in various capacities either work for, serve on the Board of, or in some way support the aims and objectives of the AIDS and Hepatitis council. You all play such a vital role in dealing with the impact of the HIV epidemic.

As you all know this year's theme is GETTING TO ZERO. That is zero to shame and discrimination, zero new conversions and sickness, and zero AIDS related deaths.

It is encouraging to read how many activities have either happened or are happening all around the Territory for AIDS Awareness Week. I have just selected four examples

- In Alice Springs, one of their activities is a “spreading information not infection day”
- In Nhulunbuy one activity is Paul Turner speaking on Radio and at Nhulunbuy High School.
- In Tennant Creek there is a display in the supermarket and a joint activity with the Indigenous public health unit.
- In Darwin one of the many activities is marketing with posters and other collateral at Darwin Correctional Centre.

These are matters of the present. In a few minutes I know your President, Bill Patterson is going to say a lot more about the situation with the Council and the epidemic generally as at the present time.

I thought it may be of interest as a comparison to say a little about the past. I have had the privilege of being Patron of the Aids Council as it was then, and later the AIDS and Hepatitis Council since 1986. I am aware that over the years the Council has had many ups and downs and plenty of hard struggles. My own involvement over the years has varied a great deal, from frequent to only occasional.

It may amuse you, or perhaps horrify you to know a little about what it was like to be Patron in those early days.

During the 1980's and even into the 1990's If I mentioned to friends or colleagues that I was going to an AIDS Council function they would say to me, such things as "well don't have anything to eat or drink, and make sure you don't shake anybody's hands". The ignorance about AIDS in the wider community was appalling. It was perceived as solely a homosexual problem. There was a widespread perception, that victims were more blame worthy than deserving of any sympathy.

I do remember how sad it was to meet a few young men who had come to the Northern Territory because their own families had disowned them. They had been forced to leave home when it was revealed that they had AIDS. Some came to the Northern Territory because there was then a very good carer service provided. There were some wonderful people here in Darwin who volunteered their time to care for a number of the terminally ill, at that time of course there was no medication to mitigate the condition or delay death.

The other very sad aspect was that at that time no person could disclose that they had HIV or AIDS as it was always referred to at that time. If they mentioned they had that condition they would almost always lose their employment or have great difficulty gaining employment.

It was also a time when HIV could be transmitted by blood transfusion and there were a couple of very sad instances in Darwin where that had been the case. Fortunately that seems to be a problem that has been resolved but those of you who work in health care would know a lot more about that issue than I do.

It is through your efforts that great improvements have come about in dealing with this world wide epidemic. I know there are still many challenges to face but when you reflect on those, you may also want to reflect on the fact you have come a long way.

Thank you all for the work you do and for being here today. It is my privilege to launch AIDS Awareness Week.

I now welcome your president, Mr Bill Patterson to the lectern.