



Transcript provided by the Kaiser Family Foundation¹
(Tip: Click on the binocular icon to search this document)

**Jon Cohen Interview
Kaiser Family Foundation
July 21, 2010**

¹ The Kaiser Family Foundation makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

[START RECORDING]

JACKIE JUDD: Jon Cohen, welcome back as always.

JON COHEN: Thank you.

JACKIE JUDD: We're about midway through the 18th International AIDS Conference. As I said earlier this week, you've been to many, many of these. And at some of the conferences you've attended, I know that South Africa has been treated like something of a pariah, but you've told me that this time you feel, you sense, you see something different. What is it?

JON COHEN: It's tremendous. When Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa, he said, "We are no longer the skunk of the world." They're no longer the skunk of the conference, you know. In 2000 the conference was held in Durban and Thabo Mbeki was then President and at the time he was questioning whether HIV caused AIDS and organized a big panel to discuss the issue.

The AIDS research community was livid, outraged at this and there was a huge disconnect when he spoke at the opening ceremony at the conference: How can this guy be speaking? And his Health Minister was the laughingstock of this community: she advocating garlic and lemon to treat HIV infection. And when she came to this meeting, you know, their booth was trashed here by activist.

¹ The Kaiser Family Foundation makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

Well, today, South Africans that I met with said to me, you know, yesterday was Goosebump Day for South Africans. Another South African said, "We are all holding our heads high here."

JACKIE JUDD: And that's because of the release of the microbicide trial which was led by South African researchers.

JON COHEN: Part of the equation.

JACKIE JUDD: But that was only part of it, right?

JON COHEN: That's only part of it. Now, there's something actually larger than that. I mean, that was the huge news event of the conference, but the larger thing is with the new presidency of Zuma, he has come in and doubled the budget for treating people, started a massive treatment program based on testing everyone in the country.

Remember, South Africa has more HIV-infected people than any country. Five million people. And they have committed to paying for this themselves, so all of this handwringing about where's the money going to come from? Here is a country that's a middle, middle income country in Africa saying, we're paying. They're paying 83 percent of the cost, and they doubled their budget for this.

And the Health Minister spoke at the opening yesterday and was eloquent, was rational, was, I mean, incredibly impressive, and explained what they were aiming to do and how they were going to fund it.

¹ The Kaiser Family Foundation makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

JACKIE JUDD: The Global Village, which is not far from us, has many booths of many organizations, some governments. There is one from South Africa in part sponsored by the Minister of Health, and the slogan on it is "South Africa Takes Responsibility."

JON COHEN: Yes, and it's precisely the model that everyone's been advocating. The countries that are hardest hit have to take responsibility themselves, and when you had a President like Mbeki who was questioning whether HIV even caused AIDS, it created massive confusion, and a sense of denial throughout the country. And I think the thing about Zuma is, in part, he's had a lot of - he's listened to and had a lot of pressure from UNAIDS and other groups about how much his legacy could be affected by taking a stance like this.

And his personal life further confuses the issue: He has several wives, he was accused of rape and claimed that he had to have sex with the woman because that's his culture; she wanted it and then she was HIV-infected, he said, "but I showered afterward," so the fact that he's the person doing it, to many people here is just mind blowing.

JACKIE JUDD: When we came to Vienna, the gateway to eastern Europe, I thought that you and I both had the expectation that through the week we would be talking more than we have been about the epidemic in eastern Europe.

JON COHEN: Yes.

¹ The Kaiser Family Foundation makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

JACKIE JUDD: We're talking about South Africa instead.

JON COHEN: You know - and it's a good point and South Africans - the changes in South Africa largely came about because of the activism there, which is very organized. And it built out of the anti-apartheid activism, just as activism in the United States and Europe built out of the organized gay community.

Well, eastern Europe has had a very fractured activism. I expected there to be activists here in mass because, you know, Russia and Ukraine both could do many more things to help stop the spread of HIV in injecting drug users in particular. And there's no real organized activism. There certainly have been individual activists giving powerful speeches here.

JACKIE JUDD: And there's been an absence of government leaders.

JON COHEN: There are no government lead - I mean, there's no one. And, you know, we're right next door and they're just not here. So I think it's a very interesting twist.

JACKIE JUDD: Let's move on to science for a moment. One of the things we've not yet talked about is vaccines.

JON COHEN: Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: What have you picked up, heard through the week that interests you?

¹ The Kaiser Family Foundation makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

JON COHEN: Well, there was a session - before the meeting actually started, they had some sort of background sessions and there was a really fascinating session about vaccines. The Holy Grail for vaccines is no vaccine has ever produced an antibody in a human that really works against the virus, so that's the Holy Grail. Can we ever find that great antibody? That's just one immune response that you want, but it's a powerful one, a central one.

And shortly before the meeting there was a report of some great new antibodies that were found in a person, but the question is, how do you go from the antibody to the vaccine? The vaccine has to have what is called the antigen, it's a piece of the virus or the whole virus. It's a modified form of the virus. So there's now this whole discussion about how do you reverse engineer? And it's a really fascinating topic.

There are no great leads about how to do it, but the fact that they're trying, that people are making a little bit of progress, I think is really interesting.

JACKIE JUDD: So, all in all, do you have - when you've talked to scientists, is there a sense of progress, of optimism, of pessimism?

JON COHEN: Yes, there is, I mean, there are new leads, and there are new techniques to get at the central problem of why there hasn't been more success with vaccines.

¹ The Kaiser Family Foundation makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

There's also an interesting discussion about - with the success with the microbicide, it's leading people to think that oral prevention that we've talked about before is probably going to work too on some level. Well, now, what happens once you have microbicides working and, maybe, let's say you can take a pill that helps an HIV uninfected person from becoming infected.

Well, it makes it easier for a vaccine because if you combine prevention strategies, a mildly effective vaccine that, on its own wouldn't really have much impact, combined with these other things, maybe it would. Maybe when you have the microbicide, you don't completely stop the virus, but your immune system kicks in from the vaccine and does the rest of the job, they're working together.

So the vaccine by itself wouldn't have protected you, the microbicide by itself wouldn't have protected you - remember, the microbicide only protected 39 percent, it wasn't 100 percent. And that's a fascinating concept.

The other side of the coin is how do you run a study like that? Man, is that complicated.

JACKIE JUDD: Okay. More later.

JON COHEN: Okay.

JACKIE JUDD: We'll talk again tomorrow.

JON COHEN: Thank you, Jackie.

JACKIE JUDD: Jon Cohen of Science Magazine.

¹ The Kaiser Family Foundation makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

Jon Cohen Interview
Kaiser Family Foundation
7/21/10

8

[END RECORDING]

¹ The Kaiser Family Foundation makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.