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**Jon Cohen Interview  
Kaiser Family Foundation  
July 19, 2010**

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**FEMALE SPEAKER:** Welcome back Jon Cohen of *Science Magazine*. Thirty-six hours into the conference the overriding theme seems to be this overriding tension, between all of the people attending this conference, and the donor governments. Not enough money, they say.

**JON COHEN:** It's understandable. The world went from no poor people receiving antiretroviral drugs, not all that long ago. You know, 2002 to 2003 there was nothing. And now we're up to five million people. Who paid for it? The rich countries of the world. And now they want to expand and they also want to keep everybody going who's on drugs. And the rich countries are going, we don't have anymore money. And so they're looking at everyone, and they're also looking at the developing countries, and saying hey, you promised you would pick up some of the slack here. And there was a presentation today, where a woman put up pictures of leaders' cars, and private planes, from developing countries, to say how many lives could be on treatment if this person didn't own this vehicle.

I think there's outrage at everyone, for not doing more, and taking advantage of the opportunity because so much good has happened, with what has been invested, and that's the bottom line.

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**FEMALE SPEAKER:** And underscoring the financial situation, was this report that the Kaiser Family Foundation along with UNAIDS put out, in which it showed that funding basically had flattened.

**JON COHEN:** That was very sobering because nobody had really documented it before and so we now can see very clearly that we've hit the ceiling. And if you look back over the past five years, you see the skyrocketing of funding. So it's as though you grew up in a wealthy family and suddenly your parents lost their jobs.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** And an interesting dynamic to my mind occurred today, here in Vienna at all of these AIDS Conferences, they're known as the two Bills. Bill Clinton and Bill Gates. Both spoke separately, both had a very large audiences. And so this issue of what donor governments are giving suddenly became more about what the United States is doing.

**JON COHEN:** I think that's really perceptive, and it was interesting how both of them dealt with that, too. And, in the case of Bill Gates, it's not just about what is the United States doing, but why aren't you doing more. What was interesting is that both of them deflected it, in a very, it seemed genuine way. And one of the things in the Kaiser Report I found interesting, that I have here, is if you look at the U.S. contribution, based on Gross Domestic Product, what you

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can see is that the U.S. is actually contributing more than everyone else. That's the point that both of them were making as hey, don't just get all in your druthers about the U.S. The U.S. could do more, but it's doing a lot. There are other countries and ironically Austria, where the meeting is being held, is one of the worst of wealthy nations, who could do a lot more.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** And one of the other words beside the financial issue that we're hearing a lot about is the need to find greater efficiencies. Are you hearing any big, new ideas about new efficiencies, meaning you get more bang for the dollar.

**JON COHEN:** When Bill Gates spoke, there was a protest took place, right before and during his talk, of these people who want the Robinhood Tax, which says take financial transactions and tax those. And later in the press conference I asked him, "Do you support this Robinhood Tax?" He said, "No. The people I know in the financial world don't think that's going to work." So here is the most prominent of big money ideas to bring in new money, and Bill Gates knows something about money. He knows more than I do saying, no, it's not going to work.

Clinton had a lot of ideas. There is an airline ticket tax, there's this Red Campaign that brings in money. And Clinton said yes, maybe we should do cell phone telethons like

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we had with Haiti, or add .50 cents to sports tickets. But my sense is that it's all really fuzzy. That nobody has a concrete plan for how to find – you know, this is a short fall of \$16 billion a year.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** And no new, big ideas in terms of how to better deliver drugs. How to better create a more effective health care system in a poor, needy community.

**JON COHEN:** I certainly didn't hear anything that made me turn my head. What I heard was that the things we know work, aren't being applied. Task shifting, for example. Moving something to a nurse, instead of a doctor. They've been talking about that for years. Could it be done more aggressively? Well of course it could. But, why is it going to magically happen now; because there's a financial pinch? Certainly that will push it, but it's not a new idea. And there are lots of little things like that you can do, to save money, but I didn't hear anything particularly innovative. It was just saying we need to monitor it more closely, and push it.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** Let's move on to the science for a moment. I know that you heard a speech at the opening ceremonies Sunday night that very much interested you. And it was about a cure.

**JON COHEN:** Yeah, and it ties right into this because – okay, here's the world saying we can't afford this. Well,

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what's the best way to stop spending money on Aids? Cure people, so they don't need drugs any longer. Is it a fantasy? It has been thought of as a fantasy, since the beginning of the epidemic, and with good reason. It's an incredibly difficult thing to clear the virus from a person's body, because it weaves itself into our chromosomes. But, there's a new idea. What if you could treat people with something that got them off of antiretroviral drugs, for prolonged periods, maybe for life? That's called a functional cure. So, there's this whole momentum now to try to do that, and also with that exotic dream of completely wiping out the virus. And there's good reason now to think that it's possible; a reason that didn't exist a few years ago.

**FEMALE INTERVIEWER:** What's the good reason?

**JON COHEN:** Well, there's a symbolic reason, and that's the one person who appears to have been cured. It was a very unusual case; it was reported in *The New England Journal of Medicine*—

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** One person.

**JON COHEN:** One person; but still it shows it's possible. He had a terrible cancer, and had a transplant; his immune system was basically wiped out and replaced. It's nothing you would do with other people. But, there's an old saying in science; you only need one talking dog, to know that a dog can talk. You don't even need a control group. This was

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kind of a talking dog. You went, whoa! It looks like this guy's cured. He went from needing antiretroviral drugs, and hasn't had them for a few years. The virus has not come back. So, it opened up ideas; I mean minds and ideas came forward. New funding has come forward and there've also been technical advances in the basic research that make people think we've got new tools, to get at the very question of why we haven't been able to cure. And you want to ask me what that is?

**FEMALE INTERVIEWER:** What?

**JON COHEN:** It's fantastic! The reason I love this stuff anyway is because it's just the grittiest of science. It's really complicated, but at its core, it's really simple. When you're infected with HIV, you have some cells in your body that don't produce the virus. They have the virus, but they don't make new ones. They're just sleeping; they're dormant, and they make pools, reservoirs, of latent, sleeping cells. So, to cure somebody, you've got to wake those cells up and clear them. Because the immune system can't even see the virus there; it can't wipe those out. Anti-HIV drugs do nothing to those sleeping viruses. So the new idea is—one idea is, how do we tickle those cells and wake them up? And then, get rid of those cells. And it's really cool stuff, because it gets to the very heart of the most cutting-edge, molecular biology; and I'm a geek. I like that stuff.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** And it's being discussed here.

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**JON COHEN:** It's being discussed at a level that blows my mind, like never before; and there was a meeting before the meeting, for two days organized by Nobel Laureate François Barré-Sinoussi who co-discovered HIV, to just focus on this, with the leading minds. It was great.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** Very interesting. Thank you, Jon. We'll talk to you again tomorrow.

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