

The business of HIV/AIDS

For the first time in its 183 year history, this week's issue of *The Lancet* is black and white and (RED) all over. The journal also contains, rather unusually, advertisements for a Motorola mobile phone, an American Express card, and clothing by GAP. This is because *The Lancet* has joined (PRODUCT) RED, which was launched at the World Economic Forum earlier this year to provide additional money for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. This issue, devoted entirely to the predicament of HIV/AIDS, coincides with the International AIDS Society meeting that will be held in Toronto, Aug 13–18; some of the papers included in the pages that follow will be presented at the conference.

Bono and Bobby Shriver, who came up with the (PRODUCT) RED concept, have brought together an unusual range of bedfellows—American Express, Converse, GAP, Giorgio Armani, Motorola, and media partner MySpace. Each company has developed its own (RED) product and will donate a percentage of profits to support the Global Fund's activities against HIV/AIDS. (RED) has made \$10 million in its first 4 months and the organisation hopes to convince many more companies to develop a (PRODUCT) RED item. *The Lancet* is taking part in this exciting initiative and is contributing \$30 000 to (PRODUCT) RED in support of this important project. We hope that other medical and scientific journals and publishers will join this cause.

Around 20% of the \$14.9 billion that is needed to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS this year will be disbursed by the Global Fund. However, up until now only 1% of the Global Fund's income has come from private institutions. The Global Fund has a funding shortfall of \$2.1 billion, nearly half the \$5.5 billion it needs to finance new and old grants, and so clearly needs to widen its revenue streams. (RED) is one way of doing just that. It is also an innovative means of bringing the Global Fund's work to the public's attention via the high street.

(RED) is not the only way that the business community can contribute to fighting the HIV/AIDS epidemic, of course. Many companies are beginning to realise that it is in their interests—both morally and commercially—to do more to help people living in poorer countries who have HIV/AIDS. Indeed, as the Viewpoint on page 547 argues, large companies such as Heineken have found

that there are few, if any, reasons why they should not help members of their workforce who are infected with HIV. After all, many companies that traditionally thought of themselves as American or European now use large quantities of low-cost, and sometimes highly skilled, labour in countries such as China and India. As a result, they now have many more incentives than they did 10 years ago to help ensure that HIV/AIDS does not spread further.

First, it is financially viable for companies to provide free care for employees who have HIV/AIDS, now that the price of antiretrovirals has dropped to \$150 per person per year for first-line regimens. Indeed, some studies have shown that companies save money by providing free HIV prevention and treatment programmes to keep their workforce healthy. Second, globalisation has brought huge opportunities for companies to sell their products to people living in developing countries. However, populations ravaged by AIDS have little cash to spend on goods produced by the developed world. Third, some multinational corporations have developed a reputation for exploiting cheap labour by providing unacceptable "sweat shop" working conditions for their employees. Provision of treatment for employees with HIV/AIDS is one way for them to regain their reputation.

Business leaders are beginning to realise that the HIV/AIDS epidemic may adversely affect their bottom lines in the future unless they start to do something to help now. The Global Health Initiative of the World Economic Forum and The Global Business Coalition Against HIV/AIDS, which is working with the Global Fund, have been pioneers in this area. Crucially, top executives need to lead from the front to ensure that stigma is reduced in the workplace; that their companies provide a full range of prevention and treatment programmes; and that potential employees are not discriminated against on the basis of their HIV status.

HIV/AIDS has been with us for 25 years now. We know that people who live with the virus can control it and enjoy productive and fruitful lives. Business leaders have begun to realise that their responsibilities run deep and extend well beyond profit and loss. With (PRODUCT) RED they are going one important step further, demonstrating leadership and commitment in areas of vital societal interest. ■ *The Lancet*



See **Viewpoint** page 547

For (PRODUCT) RED see
<http://www.joinred.com/>

For AIDS 2006 see
<http://www.aids2006.org/>