MEDIA RELEASE

Australia’s responses to HIV and sexual health adapt in the face of COVID-19 and share the lessons of earlier pandemics

16 NOVEMBER 2020, FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Australia’s top experts in HIV and sexual health to drastically rethink our national response, as clinicians, researchers, policymakers and advocates meet virtually to assess COVID-19’s impact on HIV and sexual health.

Over 700 HIV and sexual health experts will gather this week (16–20 November) for the joint Australasian HIV & AIDS and Sexual Health Conferences, this year held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and run by the Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine (ASHM).

Research about the impact of COVID-19 dominates this year’s program, as experts examine the ways HIV and STI services, prevention, treatment and education have had to adapt to the widespread public health measures implements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as social distancing.

Experts will also reflect on the ways that the COVID-19 response in Australia has been informed by the country’s world-leading response to HIV, with many top HIV and sexual health specialists also playing influential roles in shaping COVID-19 public health measures.

Service-delivery will be a significant focus, with both GPs and specialist sexual health clinics having to adapt to this new environment. Significantly, sessions throughout the conference will also focus on the changing ways Australians are having to manage their sexual health during social distancing.

Highlights will include sessions exploring:

- How has COVID-19 impacted HIV and sexual health services in Australia?
- Can Australia be the first country to eliminate HIV transmission?
- How have HIV prevention and sexual behaviour changed during COVID-19?
- Has COVID-19 made it harder to eliminate HIV in the Asia-Pacific region?

The Australasian HIV & AIDS and Sexual Health Conferences follow a year of work by HIV and sexual health experts across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region to better understand how COVID-19 will affect ongoing outbreaks of HIV and STIs.

ASHM’s Taskforce on Blood-Borne Viruses, Sexual Health and COVID-19, formed in March this year, has been publishing information and resources throughout the year about the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on HIV and sexual health in Australia and the region.

The Taskforce has focused on the needs of HIV and sexual health workers and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing guidance on how to manage HIV and STIs alongside COVID-19; information for patients engaging in casual sex during social distancing; information on the impact of telehealth on HIV and STI testing, treatment and care, and more.
Quotes from Alexis Apostolellis, ASHM CEO

“HIV and STIs haven’t gone away during COVID. Not only that, we’re in uncharted territory when it comes to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HIV and STIs, both behaviourally and epidemiologically.”

“It is more important than ever that we have the opportunity to meet like this, to share information and ideas, and the fantastic conference turnout even during this challenging year demonstrates the amazing dedication of Australia’s HIV and sexual health workforce.”

Quotes from Dr Jason Ong, ASHM Board Member and Conference Co-Chair

“HIV and sexual health clinicians and researchers have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 response this year, sharing what our sector and communities have learned, in particular from the four decades of Australia’s world-leading HIV response.”

“One of the key lessons of Australia’s HIV response is that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our communities tend to be the people hit hardest during a pandemic. These are exactly the kinds of lessons we must keep in mind as the COVID-19 pandemic continues into its second year.”

ENDS

The Australasian HIV & AIDS and Sexual Health Conferences will feature a live program running 16–20 November, and an on-demand program available all week. To view the conference program, visit: https://hivshconferences2020.com.au/

ASHM is a peak organisation of health professionals in Australia and New Zealand who work in HIV, viral hepatitis, other BBVs and sexually transmissible infections. For more information on ASHM’s work, including policy engagement, education and resources, visit: ashm.org.au

MEDIA CONTACT

For more information or to arrange an interview or conference media pass, contact ASHM Media and Public Affairs Manager, Benjamin Riley: 0401 267 024 / media@ashm.org.au