

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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Women With HIV Focus of World AIDS Week Panel

By Amanda Erickson
Columbia Daily Spectator

On the eve of World AIDS Day, Columbia students gathered to hear professors discuss the issues facing women in the age of the AIDS crisis.

Held at the Columbia University Medical Center, "Cutting Edge Research and Issues on Women and AIDS" focused on the special struggles affecting women with HIV/AIDS. The talk, hosted by the School of International and Public Affairs and the Global Health Forum, is one of the first events of Columbia's second annual Global AIDS Awareness Week, which coincides with the Dec. 1 observance of World AIDS Day. This year, the focus of the international awareness day is on women and girls.

The evening featured a panel of health experts who spoke on the problems and solutions that have arisen in dealing with a disease that is increasingly prevalent among women. According to a UNAIDS fact sheet, nearly 50 percent of adults living with HIV globally are women, and the number of women living with HIV has increased in every region of the world in the past two years.

Zena Stein, professor of public health, set the tone for the evening. "We are losing the battle with AIDS," she said.

The epidemic is hitting women especially hard, Stein noted. She said that today, women are contracting AIDS at a much higher rates than men. "As a result," Stein said "we must focus on helping to treat and prevent AIDS in women."

Stein proposed a more woman-centered approach to handling the AIDS crisis. She advocated the dissemination of female condoms and the use of programs that teach women how to convince their partners to use protection.

"The spread of female condoms" she said, "is the best hope I personally have of stopping for the moment the spread of AIDS."

Stein also cited several new developments she considers integral to slowing the spread of AIDS, including the development of a microbicide designed to kill the AIDS virus after it enters a woman's vagina.

The next speaker was David Hoos, professor of epidemiology. Hoos discussed the rapid increase in HIV/AIDS in women both in the

United States and internationally. The incidence of AIDS in women has increased steadily since the 1970s and will continue to grow.

Hoos faulted the Bush administration for its inappropriate leadership of the AIDS movement. "While the Bush Administration has given a lot of money for AIDS treatment," he said, its faith-based approach "undermines other global AIDS movements."

Hoos suggested that AIDS activists move beyond the "ABC" approach—abstinence, be faithful, and condoms—used by the United States. He proposed a fourth step, encompassing everything from improving women's educational and employment opportunities to breaking the taboo on discussing female sexuality.

The final speaker was Alan Berkman, a coordinator of Columbia's Mother-to-Child Transmission Plus Initiative. Berkman discussed the successes of MTCT-Plus, which is designed to move from simply diagnosing HIV victims to providing family centered treatment approaches, including comprehensive health services as well as access to retroviral treatments.

The program, which is coordinated by the Mailman School of Public Health, recently received a \$125 million grant from the U.S. government to expand their work in sub-Saharan Africa.

All three speakers fielded questions from an interested audience, including inquiries about the apparent disconnect between faith-based AIDS programs and the science of the disease, as well as the role of women as victims.

Laurel Turbin, a first-year medical student, said that the questions were the best part of the night. "It was great to see students question the experts," she said.

Max Fischer, a third-year in the Mailman School of Public Health, agreed. "The discussion brought up many different perspectives," he said.

The panel, which was sponsored by Columbia Global Justice, is one of numerous events scheduled on campus for World AIDS Week. Tonight, Project Health is sponsoring a Public Health Panel, and Global Justice is holding a film screening of *In Women's Hands*, a film about women and HIV prevention.

On Thursday, the Sinikithemba Choir of South Africa is performing in the Davis Auditorium, and Global Justice, the Columbia Jazz Studies Program, and Fat Cat Jazz are hosting "Jazz Against AIDS" to benefit a Ugandan youth organization.

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