

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

June 24, 2004

The Honorable Tommy G. Thompson
Secretary of Health and Human Services
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to protest your decision to stop over two dozen U.S. scientists from presenting peer-reviewed studies and leading research seminars for international colleagues at this summer's International AIDS Conference. By grounding these experts, you are keeping them from learning from their peers across the world, and you are depriving the world of scientific leadership by the United States. Areas of research that have been shortchanged by your policy include how to prevent HIV infections, how to monitor drug resistance, how to counter AIDS stigma, how to reduce life threatening bacterial infections in HIV patients, and how to understand the molecular biology of the CD4 receptor.

We urge you to reconsider your decision.

Traditionally, the International AIDS Conference has been a key opportunity for HIV/AIDS researchers from around the world to learn about new scientific findings and to share ideas about future research. For example, at the 1996 conference in Vancouver, researchers reported some of the first data on combination therapy for HIV/AIDS. This information revolutionized the way HIV/AIDS is treated.

Rather than foster scientific exchange, however, you decided earlier this year to limit to 50 the number of participating HHS scientists in this year's 15th annual conference in Bangkok, Thailand. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) will each be allowed 20 participants, with only an additional ten employees from the entire remainder of the Department and its agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).¹ The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at NIH, one of the world's biggest funders of AIDS research, will be able to send nine employees.² According to press accounts, NIH's Office of AIDS Research is not sending anyone to this critical conference.³

¹ *Edict Limits U.S. Speakers at Bangkok Conference*, Science (Apr. 23, 2004).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

Because your decision to limit participation occurred after the deadline for submissions, the United States was placed in the embarrassing position of having to cancel presentations. According to conference organizers, 40 presentations were withdrawn. This list includes presentations covering important areas of HIV research, including:

- evidence-based strategies to prevent HIV infection;
- ways to counter AIDS stigma;
- a system to keep track of drug resistance;
- problems with racial and ethnic disparities in HIV care;
- the challenge of addressing women who acquire HIV through heterosexual contact;
- the performance of rapid HIV tests;
- the clinical care of infections associated with HIV in Kenya and South Africa; and
- the molecular biology of the CD4 receptor.⁴

Conference organizers also report that the Bush Administration's decision to limit participation has led to the cancellation of satellite sessions, which are separate meetings on specific research topics in Bangkok. These satellite sessions are particularly important to scientists from countries such as Zimbabwe and Kenya, with HIV rates of over 20%, who are taught critical skills such as grant-writing, data collection, and health-cost monitoring.⁵

The scientific community has criticized your new policy. In an April 29, 2004, letter to you, the American Foundation for AIDS Research and other organizations wrote:

We are . . . extremely dismayed to hear that HHS, at your direction, has limited participation in the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok — the key AIDS science conference in the world — to only 50 federal employees. . . . The implications of this decision for the global fight against AIDS are serious. . . . Curtailing the involvement of federal scientists in the International AIDS Conference deprives international participants access to the latest research findings, opportunities for research support, and opportunities to collaborate.⁶

⁴ *Withdrawn US Govt Abstracts and Titles* (June 1, 2004) (spreadsheet obtained from the International AIDS Society).

⁵ Laurie Garrett, *This Nasty Game is Scored in Lives*, Los Angeles Times (May 30, 2004).

⁶ Letter from the American Foundation for AIDS Research et al. to Secretary Tommy G. Thompson (Apr. 29, 2004).

Dr. Neal Nathanson, associate dean for global health programs at the University of Pennsylvania and director of NIH's office of AIDS research from 1998 to 2000, said of your decision: "It's absolutely ridiculous to micromanage CDC and NIH in this way."⁷

Soon after your decision, the International AIDS Society and the Thai Ministry of Public Health and the International AIDS society even offered to help pay to bring over the additional U.S. researchers.⁸

Your decision to limit participation in this conference has been attributed to two reasons. Neither is persuasive.

One reason cited for the limitation is cost. According to your spokesman, Bill Pierce, HHS spent \$3.6 million to send 236 researchers to the International AIDS conference in Barcelona in 2002.⁹ But these costs are small compared to the potential benefits. Scientific exchange is an integral part of the research. The kinds of exchanges that occur at these major conferences are a vital part of the scientific process and can lead to more productive areas of research. Cutting off those exchanges is an example of being penny wise but pound foolish.

Another reason cited for this decision is retribution. According to a press report citing an e-mail from a high level NIH official, this decision may have been made, in part, as a "result of the treatment . . . [you] received in Barcelona."¹⁰ As you recall, you were booed in Barcelona by AIDS activists protesting the Bush Administration's policies. We understand that your spokesperson has denied that retribution has played a role in your most recent decision.¹¹ While we believe that speakers at these conferences deserve to be treated with respect, the behavior of some participants at a conference two years ago should not be used as grounds to punish scientists two years later.

During this Administration's tenure, the United States has been a reluctant participant in many world ventures. This is a regrettable trend — and particularly so in the case of AIDS research. There is a worldwide effort afoot to fight a global epidemic. Other countries need our expertise, and we should not hesitate to share our knowledge.

⁷ *Edict Limits U.S. Speakers at Bangkok Conference*, *supra* note 1.

⁸ *Thai Aid for U.S. Scientists?* *Science Magazine* (May 7, 2004).

⁹ *Scaled-Down U.S. Delegation to AIDS Conference Protested*, *USA Today* (May 10, 2004).

¹⁰ *Edict Limits U.S. Speakers at Bangkok Conference*, *supra* note 1.

¹¹ *Id.*

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We urge you to reconsider your decision and allow all key scientists to travel to the world conference.

Sincerely,



Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Government Reform



Louise McIntosh Slaughter
Member of Congress