Dear Ivy,

The Joint Australasian HIV&AIDS and Sexual Health Conferences kicked off yesterday with a warm Welcome to Country from Aunty Ann Weldon, Wiradjuri Koorie balaagan (Wiradjuri Aboriginal woman) and representative of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council who asked us to walk beside, not ahead of, Aboriginal people and reminded us of the importance of remembering those who have come before us; the giants on whose shoulders we stand.

Chris Bourne from NSW Health illustrated this beautifully in his ASHA Oration, where he honoured all of the mentors who have guided him in his career spanning 30+ years working on sexual health in Australia’s urban practices, remote clinics and internationally. His career reflections and predictions for the future were wide spanning — from the importance of HIV/STI testing, stating “when there’s no testing, there’s no data, no problem, no money, no strategy, no services, and no need to educate yourself or change behaviours,” to how digital healthcare offers a way “to support more people to test more often” and overcome stigma and discrimination.

The topic of eSexual Health was further explored by Claudia Estcourt from Glasgow Caledonian University who brought nuance to the discussion of digital healthcare, saying “just because you can Snapchat, doesn’t mean you can navigate the health information you need online.” Using vivid examples from her own clinical practice, Claudia showed us the great potential offered by eSexual Healthcare if done right — by integrating it into the wider health delivery system and focusing on making it as accessible and efficient as possible to the right patients at the right time.

We also heard from Francois Venter from the University of the Witwatersrand who presented on the significant weight gain being experienced as a side effect by millions of HIV-positive people taking antiretroviral treatments. We’ll be hearing more from him and other panellists at Wednesday evening’s symposium, so stay tuned for more on this topic.

Delve deeper with On Demand
HIV, Sexual Health & COVID-19

Many of yesterday’s sessions also explored the way we’ve coped as a wider community through COVID-19.

The morning symposium ‘Practice makes perfect? How COVID-19 has transformed HIV & SH services in Australia’, gathered healthcare workers and policymakers from general practice and AOD services to rural health and pharmacy, for a discussion about how services have had to adapt this year. A resounding message — echoed in the questions from the audience — was that we need to ensure vulnerable populations aren’t left behind.

Over lunch, we heard about how people living with HIV have found virtual peer support during the pandemic through the CHINWAG: Positive Connection initiative.

Glenn Ryall from Queensland Positive People highlighted that the digital space has not only been a replacement for in-person support during the pandemic but that it also enabled new connections and opportunities. “When we think about planning for 2021, we really need to [include online programs] because it meets people where they are at,” he said.

Panellist Ruan Uys from the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation — Australia’s longest running HIV charity — summed up the importance and effectiveness of peer-led models of care best when he said “there’s absolutely no substitute for lived experience. You have understanding and insider knowledge of what someone is going through, because you have been there yourself.”

The evening symposium covered the importance of reclaiming, valuing and promoting pleasure in public and private discourse, which has profound implications for public health. Anne Philpott from The Pleasure Project put it so eloquently when she said, “people with more sexual confidence who know what they want ensures that they are also able to say no to unsafe sex”.

Disability and LGBTIQ+ activist Jax Jacki Brown shared how pleasure can be a tool to unpack the experience of living in a non-normative body and assist with loving and reclaiming their body as their own. We also heard from Zahra Stardust of the Scarlet Alliance about the tremendous activism and organising that has been taking place in the sex worker community over the past few months — from advocating to the government to not ignore sex work in its COVID-safe planning, to creating an emergency support fund (donate here if you can) that has supported many sex workers who have not yet been able to return to work or access government benefits.
Speaker slides and videos

We’ve received a few questions from you asking about speaker slides. These will be available after the conference from those speakers who have given us permission to share. To access a PDF of the slides, visit the day/session you’re interested in, in the event portal and click on the “handouts” section on the right hand side of the screen.

You will also find a video recording of the session within 24 hours of the session, see how to access the session recording below.

What you’re saying on social media

Yesterday also saw a great start on the social media side of things — day one saw more than 120 tweets on the #HIVAUS20 and #SH20 hashtag. A big thanks to everyone who has helped share the conference around the world. We particularly saw lots of twitter activity around the Satellite Session ‘Trust in the machine’ and the evening Symposium ‘Pleasure in the Pandemic’.

Please keep up the live tweeting using the #HIVAUS20 and #SH20 hashtags.

Sessions we’re looking forward to today

**Terryann Clark**, who describes herself as an ‘impatient Maori nurse’, takes the floor in this morning’s plenary at 8:30am AEDT to explore whether 20 years of Youth2000 research has made a difference for Māori youth. **Dawn Casey** from the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation will then tell us more about a community-
controlled approach to health.

Continuing yesterday's COVID-19 theme, in tonight's symposium at 6pm AEDT we'll hear how the pandemic has impacted the emotional and physical wellbeing of people living with HIV and whether it has helped or hindered HIV elimination efforts across the region.

Speaking of HIV elimination, speakers at the 10am HIV symposium will share what progress has been made towards this goal more broadly — can Australia be the first country in the world to eliminate HIV? They will be taking questions from the audience, which you can submit in the event portal by commenting in the "Live Q&A" section on the right-hand side of the screen when you’re in the session.

We hope your second day of the conference goes well, if you have any questions or technical troubles, don’t hesitate to email us at conference@ashm.org.au.

Cheers,
Michelle & ASHM Conference and Events Team