

Doctor Urges Creation of "Science of Healthcare Delivery" Wired Science Network 2/18/2008

By Alexis Madrigal

BOSTON, Mass. - While treatments have multiplied, the operations and processes for delivering those medicines haven't kept pace, slowing health improvement in developing and developed countries.

"There is an implementation bottleneck," said Jim Yong Kim, a Harvard Medical School professor and former director of the World Health Organization's HIV/AIDS program said. "We know how to do so many things already, but we're not delivering them."

Kim urged the creation of a new science of healthcare delivery that would systematically evaluate which techniques worked and which didn't.

He pointed to a series of small-scale endeavours in Africa as models for creating healthcare systems in regions that lack medical infrastructure, saying that they can provide a level of primary care for \$25 per year per person that would cost \$7,000 in the United States. But he also said that Western countries have their own type of bottleneck.

"When there's a new drug, it takes us 17 years to deliver it," he said, referring to the oft-criticized FDA regulatory approval process. He urged the assembled scientists to start rethinking the relationship between finding treatments and actually treating patients.

Kim spoke on a three-person panel on "Global Health Challenges" at the AAAS annual meeting that provided an overview of the current state of global health, with a focus on HIV and AIDS.

Peter Piot, of UNAIDS, preceded Kim to the podium to summarize the current state of HIV research. He noted that three million people in the developing world are now on antiretroviral drugs, pharmaceuticals that have been responsible for a dramatic lifespan extension for people with HIV. That number has grown considerably from the mere 200,000 that had access to such treatments in 2001. The major reason, he noted, is that his organization has been able to negotiate lower prices for the treatments. They now cost people in poorer nations \$175 in comparison to the more than \$10,000 annual cost here in the US.

Piot ended his talk with a call to action, saying, "Good politics saves lives. Bad politics kills people."

The final speaker, Timothy Wirth, president of the United Nations Foundation, focused on those very politics here in the US. US aid for dealing with HIV/AIDS in the developing world will at least double to \$30 billion over the next four years. If a Democrat wins the White House, both candidates have pledged to up the US humanitarian relief to \$50 billion. Wirth wants fifty percent of that money set aside for prevention programs.

Kim re-entered the discussion to dispute the validity of thinking about HIV/AIDS treatment in terms of prevention and treatment, saying, "We're talking about treatment and prevention in almost fantasy land terms." He said that any person involved with doing either one has to think about both together.