

Senator Norm Coleman  
WISHH Program HIV/AIDS 2-17-05

Thank you all for sponsoring this forum, and for giving me the chance to talk about my trip to Africa last summer. It was a life changing experience for my wife Laurie and me, and I'm happy to revisit the experience and share a few of the lessons I learned.

There were five Senate families who traveled together. And we got to three countries: South Africa, Mozambique and Botswana.

If you've never been to Africa, this will be hard to get across. But it is a continent that wins your heart and breaks it at the same time. It provides some of humanity's highest highs and lowest lows.

In Minnesota we joke about the man who loved his wife so much he almost told her. The opposite of that is Africa. The emotions are close to the surface and the affection is obvious.

Most Africans don't have what we would consider the basics of material life. But they do have an extraordinary sense of community. There is a sense of shared responsibility for the victims of suffering that is just unbelievable. As staggering as the suffering is, there is an abundance of personal generosity that takes your breath away.

But they bear a terrible burden.

Imagine a NFL football stadium full of adults and children. Now imagine that they die of AIDS. The next week, fill the stadium again and they all die again. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year.

It's a tsunami a month.

Forty million people live with AIDS world wide. One in ten will die from it this year. Five million new people will join the ranks of the infected. That is the terrible arithmetic of epidemics: as the number of infected people rises, so do the possibilities for viruses to spread.

The president has made an unparalleled commitment to fighting AIDS around the world. And during my first two years in the Senate, I coauthored two amendments to add an additional three-hundred fifty million dollars to our efforts. While this level of financial commitment is an unprecedented sign of America's overwhelming generosity, money alone is not going to save the lives of the millions upon millions who have already contracted this disease and the millions upon millions who will contract it in the future – no matter what we do.

Is it hopeless? Only if you deny the resilience of the human spirit. The whole course of human history tells us that hope is as integral to the human species as water. I have read that hope is what takes over when optimism is exhausted. Africa is not optimistic, but it is hopeful.

Here are three lessons I took away from my trip.

First, there is no substitute for leadership. Natural conditions like climate, earthquakes and disease tend to create chaos among people. It is the job of leaders to bring order out of that chaos by bringing people together to enjoy the power of unified action.

We must do everything we can to encourage the right kind of leadership development in Africa. Good leadership at many levels exists in these countries. We need to help it emerge and stay on track.

Our assistance programs can help develop leaders by building capacity and rewarding results among emerging leaders.

That's why I have been supportive of the President's measured response to providing AIDS funding. To send money into systems that are unable to absorb it and spend it wisely would leave the continent worse off.

Second, we must strike a balance between treatment and prevention. Even with a fifteen billion dollar commitment from the U.S., funds are scarce. We need to make hard choices about what will do the most good.

We cannot simply abandon the infected to die and put all our money into prevention.

Nor can we put all our effort into the easing the suffering of the infected and ignore the spread of the disease.

In our prevention programs, we realized that the most effective programs are community-based, culturally-appropriate and locally-controlled. We need to trust local authorities to know what will work best.

In our treatment programs, we are trying to the greatest good for the greatest number by creating health systems which can deal with the range of health problems people experience. We can't do everything, so we need to do as much as we can as best we can.

And that brings me to my last point: we can't view AIDS in isolation.

AIDS infected people in Africa bear a double curse. Their immune systems don't work and they live in environments full of infections.

In the end, AIDS doesn't kill anyone: it's the infections that their body can no longer fight off that do.

Thirty-five thousand people die each day from waterborne diseases. Three million children die from waterborne diseases every year.

If there is a place we can start to make this a healthier planet, it would be here: getting more people access to water that doesn't make them sick. I am committed to working with Senator Frist to increase attention to this very basic need.

On the nutrition side, people with immune systems compromised by HIV/AIDS need additional protein – fifty to one-hundred percent more – in order to stay healthy. That's where the work of soy producers and WISHH come in. A simple soy protein supplement can go a long way. And in the same vein, if we could do a better job of meeting basic nutritional needs, many of the advanced health problems the world faces would not exist.

We can't allow the urgent to distract us from the important. Even as we work to treat and prevent AIDS, we need to provide for basic needs for food and water. Any disease can become a killer epidemic in a population that doesn't have enough clean water or food to live on.

The AIDS virus is obeying a biological imperative to spread and infect as many people as possible.

It creates destruction, grief and anger. But we not allow the effects of the virus to divide us against each other.

The more energy we spend accusing, blaming and fault-finding, the less we have for treating victims, preventing new cases and dealing with the underlying health conditions that make the virus so deadly.

We shouldn't be fighting each other. We should be fighting the virus.

Thank you for your efforts on nutrition and clean water. I'll keep working to build leaders around the world, striking the balance between treatment and prevention, and working to meet basic human needs that will make our planet healthier and more hopeful for us all.