The WHO Response To The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

Until 1986, WHO paid little attention to HIV/AIDS, seen then as a disease largely limited to gay populations and intravenous drug users of the industrialized west. Then Jonathan Mann persuaded Halfdan Mahler that heterosexual transmission of the disease threatened the entire world, especially its most vulnerable citizens. For the next few years, the Global Program on AIDS mounted an intensive campaign to establish an active AIDS education and prevention program in all countries. But this ended in 1990 when Mann was dismissed, and the program lost its energy and momentum. Other organizations and agencies, most notably the World Bank, became increasingly active in AIDS. After several years of internal debate, UNAIDS was created in 1995 to combine the efforts of all UN agencies and major players in combating the spread of the disease. WHO renewed its position of leadership under Peter Piot. At the same time, the discovery of antiretrovirals meant that at least in wealthy countries, those infected with HIV could foresee living with AIDS rather than facing an immediate death sentence. In 2001 the UN made a declaration of commitment on AIDS, and in 2003, UNAIDS began the unprecedented effort to bring antiretroviral treatment to the world's poor.

Presenter: Dr Elizabeth Fee, Chief, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, USA
Contact: Thomson Prentice, Global Health Histories +41 22 791 4224 (prenticet@who.int)