

*'Harm Reduction - coming of age'*

**18<sup>th</sup> International  
Conference on the  
Reduction of Drug  
Related Harm**



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[www.harmreduction2007.org](http://www.harmreduction2007.org)

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**Closing Speech**

Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2007

**Lady Jocelyn Keith**

International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies

Good morning. I am going to tell you a story – a fairy story, maybe even a fable. This story begins, as all good stories should, with a “once upon a time”.

Once upon a time, there was a very handsome teenager who was about to come of age. To mark that event, a huge party was organised. More than a thousand people came from all the four corners of the world, from all the continents - more than 82 countries in all. Most of them came bearing gifts, gifts of their hands, gifts of their hearts, gifts of their minds, gifts of their dreams. They came bearing greetings in many languages and in many shapes and styles – words, films, pictures, stories.

The teenager, whose name was IHRA, was truly delighted and insisted that everyone who came to the party must take at least one gift home. Indeed, the more gifts that the visitors took home, the more IHRA was delighted. Some of the people who came knew lots of other people there. Some had come with groups of friends and like-minded people. Some knew nobody. For quite a number, this was the first time they had come such an event and it took them a while to pluck up the courage to speak.

Amongst the ones who came for the first time was one who was asked to play the fairy godmother - the one who comes to the party to give gifts for the future, ones especially for the teenager to use in the coming years. She had the power to bestow four gifts, one for each of the letters of the teenager's name – IHRA.

'I' is for the first gift - the gift of 'Imagination'. In his famous book and television series, Jacob Bronowski told us of that special capacity of the human mind to imagine a whole range of possible futures and then to decide to which one to choose. Eighteen years ago, that group of “marginalized fruitcakes” (Alex Wodak's phrase, not mine!) met in Liverpool and decided to set up this International Harm Reduction Organisation. In the course of these four days we

have heard many possible futures and ideas in the sphere of harm reduction. The challenge now is to decide which is the right path for the coming year, the coming decade.

'H' - the second gift - is for 'Humanity'. When I gave the Red Cross Red Crescent's address to the meeting of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna early this year, I used the words of our President in the preface to our publication " Spreading the Light of Science: Guidelines on harm reduction related to injecting drug use". He said, "The message is clear. It is time to be guided by the light of science, not the darkness of ignorance and fear. If we are to put a stop to this trend, communities need to treat drug users in a more humane way, respecting them as people with rights and needs". "But sadly", he went on, "political imperatives, donor demands, and ignorance and fear continue to impede the work of preventing and alleviating suffering and protecting human dignity". Let us work together to mobilise the power of humanity.

'R' is for Reliability - the third gift. In the session I chaired on Tuesday we heard of the devastating impact on people of broken promises, of the withdrawal of funding, of changes in policy direction. As the young speaker from Myanmar said, "Suffering is suffering. Dying is dying". Reputations for reliability and trust are hard won and easily lost. May IHRA always deliver what it promises and do what it says it will do.

And, finally - 'A'. This can stand for so much:

- for 'Anger' which has a wonderful capacity for transformation into constructive energy;
- for 'Allies' and 'Alliances' - both of which IHRA will need for the future. Perhaps this is a good opportunity to acknowledge the friendship and assistance of Gerry Stimson in the preparation of my paper for Red Cross entitled "A new commitment to a humanitarian drug policy based on reason and compassion that generates action, free from ideology, violence, stigmatization and discrimination" – his advice was timely, encouraging and most useful.
- for 'Advocacy' - a major activity of IHRA to date which will be enhanced by the generous support of the British Government, but the warning of yesterday's session on community empowerment must ring in our ears – nothing about us without us. Giving voice to people's needs and concerns is a special privilege which can be granted only by the people themselves.

But my fourth and final wish for IHRA for the coming years is one of 'Agility' - being fleet of foot, able to respond to new needs, new ways of doing things, new demands, different cultures, to a steady process of devolution (of restoring the power to the people), and to adjust to changes in the environment. This essential capacity has been demonstrated in all sorts of ways already. The presentation on developments in Iran is a good example.

It is time for this fairy godmother to close. I have exhausted my four wishes. I will close in the tradition of the Maori people of New Zealand. I have been asked to explain that the reference to 'Greenstone' is a reference to what is known as

‘New Zealand Jade’. This precious stone is of particular spiritual significance to Maori – indeed, to all New Zealanders. It must be given and once given, will keep the wearer safe and bring them home.

Kia hora te marino,  
Kia whakapapa pounamu te moana,  
Kia tere te karohorohi.

May peace be widespread,  
May the sea be as smooth as Greenstone,  
May light forever dance across your path.

### **About Lady Jocelyn Keith:**

Lady Keith is one of New Zealand’s most senior nurses and has served her country as President of her National Nurses’ Association, Vice President of the National Council of Women of New Zealand, and most recently as National President, New Zealand Red Cross. She has worked in public health all her professional life including heading academic departments of public health and of nursing and midwifery in universities in New Zealand.

She represents the Asia Pacific Region on the Health and Community Services Commission for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and her scoping paper entitled “ A new commitment to a humanitarian drug policy based on reason and compassion that generates action, free from ideology, violence, stigmatization and discrimination” was endorsed by the Commission just last week. She has a few copies of it available and it will be on the Federation’s website as soon as possible.