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There was huge anticipation in the weeks leading up the Melbourne AIDS Conference. Held every two years it is probably the largest meeting of its kind for people working in the health sector. The downing of MH17 and the resultant deaths of a number of delegates to the conference only days before the Opening Ceremony had a huge impact on the conference. Over 14,000 delegates, thousands of locals and volunteers from all over Australia attended and had opportunities for sessions from 7am until 10pm. The conference had satellite meetings running for several days prior to the conference right through until the conference close.

There was also much anticipation from the AOD sector for the opportunities to showcase much of the positive work done in Australia to prevent an HIV epidemic amongst people who inject drugs.

The global village was established at the front section of the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (a previous site for APSAD conferences) and was open to the public which made the conference more than just the presentation of scientific reports across a broad range of streams. The people who use drugs (PUD) Zone was constantly a buzz with speakers and presentations and next door was the human rights networking Zone again where issues of concern for PWID were highlighted on a daily basis. One particular highlight for me was the discussion on the ethical use of media presented by several journalists who had scholarships from the Pulitzer Centre in Washington DC to work on issues related to drug use and drug users.

Drug use and especially injecting drug use was not given the profile many in Australia thought it deserved with HIV rates among PWID in Australia still among the lowest in the world. But there were a number of important sessions on viral hepatitis and HIV coinfection and how to make the newest treatments for hepatitis C affordable and accessible for the people most affected – PWID. One of the few protests at the meeting was targeted at the pharmaceutical companies involved in the production of new direct acting anti-virals for HCV.

The ‘gold ticket’ event for many was the Thursday night launch of ‘through the eye of the needle’ a film made in celebration of drug user activism and attended by many international friends and colleagues from the AOD sector. Congratulations to AIV, INPUD and Harm Reduction Vic for putting on a great show.

Social media was hot with the inclusion of ‘celebratories’ like Bill Clinton and Bob Geldolf adding their own special contributions and commentaries. There were over 100,000 tweets were made over the week of the conference with many across the drug and alcohol sector active in promoting discussion. The Australian Society for HIV Medicine also had a number of people ‘reporting back’ all of which can be accessed online

http://ashm.info/past-reports/aids2014

There are also a wide range of photos available for people to view as well check them out: