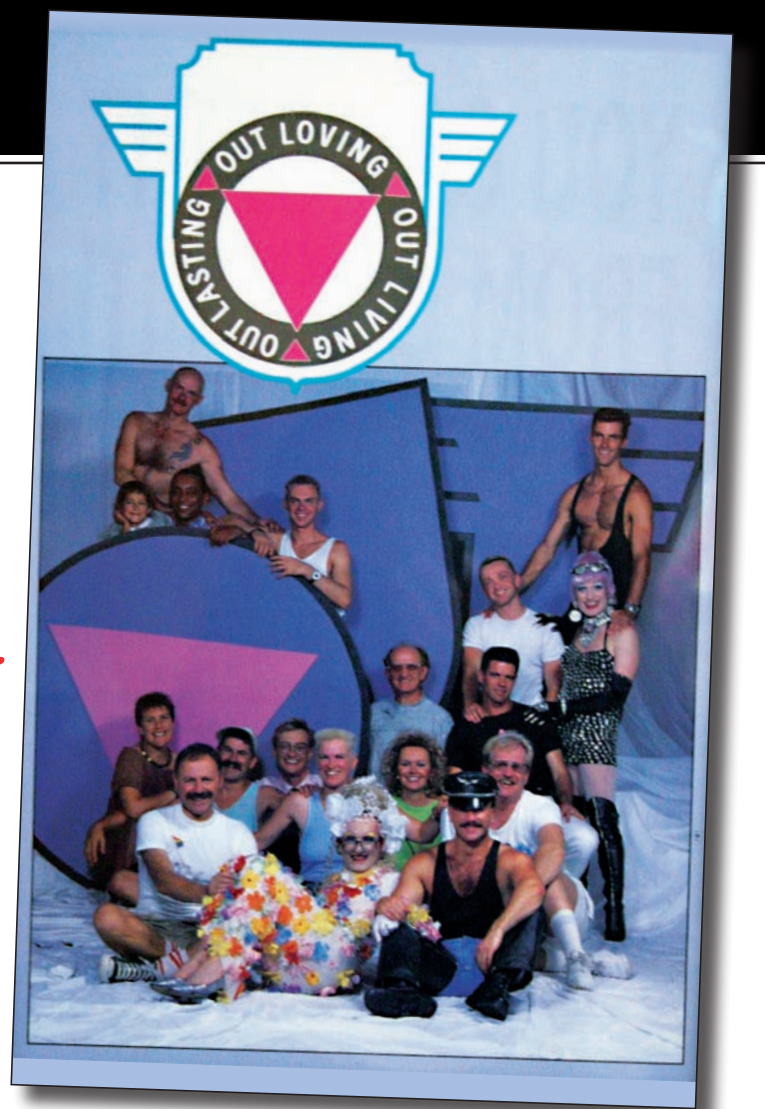




■ HISTORY OF ACON

In The Beginning Was ACON

In 2010, ACON is marking its 25th anniversary. Historian Garry Wotherspoon charts its evolution from the early days of the HIV epidemic to becoming Australia's largest GLBT health and well-being organisation.

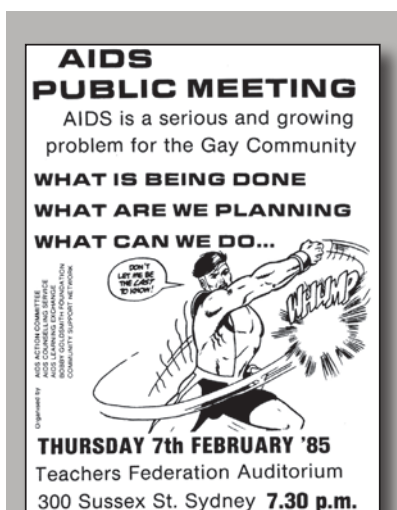


It came out of nowhere. No-one knew what it was, what caused it, or how to deal with it. But it was a guaranteed killer. It had different names in those days, in the early 1980s – among them were 'the Gay Plague', 'the black plague of the eighties', and GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency). Nowadays, what we know as HIV was simply called AIDS, and its appearance at a time when gay men's sexual and emotional lives were still illegal meant that those most affected – gay men and their community – were sure to be targeted.

Luckily, the gay community had a history of activism. From the early 1970s, the gay liberation movement had marshaled itself around a range of issues, taking on the church, the police, the medical profession and the media, over their dealings with lesbians and gay men. Such a past provided a strong foundation for the community to pull together for a political response to HIV. In fact, the linkages between gay rights, human rights and responses to HIV were identified at the very beginning of Australia's response to the epidemic.

The first meeting of the gay community that focused on the new disease was at Paddington Town Hall in June 1983, and it set up the AIDS Action Committee, which in 1985 was formally incorporated as ACON (Aids Council of NSW). Decriminalisation of sexual activity for gay men in 1984 also meant that all attention could be turned to the new threat.

There was so much to do, and so little time: people in our community were dying, and there were constant attacks from the ignorant and prejudiced. So there was an awareness that any work in HIV prevention, care and support required an 'enabling environment', and this involved working with successive



ACON played an integral role in the Australian response to the AIDS crisis, and its 'model' has been praised by international health bodies.

ACON community development poster (1988) and, inset, a public meeting flyer (1985).

state and federal governments to develop HIV strategies.

One critical early aspect was to shift the focus away from it being a morality issue to a public health issue. ACON responded with a public education program: for the gay community, messages went out via the gay media, posters appeared at sex-on-premises venues, and the 'Safe Sex Sluts' were a feature of gay events, handing out condoms and advice.

Getting relevant information out to men who were part of the gay community was relatively straightforward, but education outside the gay community, to men who have sex with men but who had no connection with the gay community, was also critical. Some of ACON's 'education' jobs in those early days were unusual. 'Beat workers' were required to go out to suburban beats, and to – somehow – 'engage' (by whatever means necessary) with those who patronised the beats, and talk to them, spreading the 'safe sex' message (it was a job highly-sought after).

For the wider Australian community, there were various media campaigns: the controversial 'Grim Reaper' TV campaign – where Death, with scythe and bowling ball, mows down an Australian family – was highly contentious, but it certainly increased awareness of the dangers of AIDS among the Australian public.

ACON's announcement in 1989 that "oral sex without a condom is OK" – after it was confirmed that, although HIV could be passed by saliva, digestion killed it – was gratefully received by most gay men – and straight women!

While HIV prevention via education programs was important, ACON was also involved in caring for people as they became sick, and helping them to die with dignity while supporting family and friends.

The advent of combination therapies from 1996 changed the disease from a killer to a chronic, manageable one. ACON's programs changed, so that HIV prevention was in the context of sex, relationships, and the full and complex lives of members of our community – a change in emphasis from 'dying with HIV' to 'living with HIV'. But the stigma associated with HIV / AIDS was something that has always been there to contend with, and it was ACON that initially gave a voice to people living with HIV/AIDS.

ACON played an integral role in the Australian response to the AIDS crisis, and its 'model' has been praised by international health bodies. Over the years its work evolved, responding to the changing needs of a society dealing with the infection, particularly as the disease was no longer confined to the gay community.

ACON continues to advocate, for changing public attitudes and laws and regulations that impact on the whole person; its programs now focus on an infected person's health in context, rather than just upon the disease. Most recently, it has expanded further to become a health promotion agency for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. But throughout this evolutionary process, ACON's HIV work has stayed at the heart of what it does, and these have set the foundations for its responses at both a policy and service delivery level.

ACON is now Australia's largest community-based GLBT health and HIV/AIDS organisation.

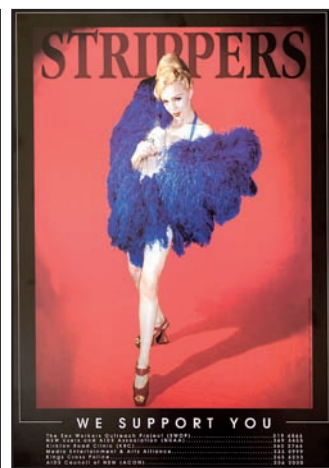
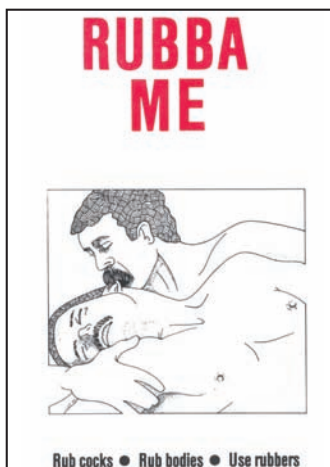
Garry Wotherspoon is a historian whose books include Being Different: nine gay men remember, and City of the Plain, a history of Sydney's gay subculture since the 1920s.





RETROSPECTIVE

25 Years of ACON: In Pictures



1				
2	3	4	5	
6	7	8	9	
10		11		

KEY TO IMAGES

1. ACON safe sex poster, 1987
2. ACON's first safe sex campaign, 1985
3. ACON safe sex pamphlet, 1988
4. ACON safe sex poster, 1989
5. ACON safe sex poster, 1990
6. Gay Asian Men Project poster, 1991
7. ACON safe injecting poster, 1992
8. Lesbian safe injecting poster, 1993
9. SWOP poster, 1995
10. ACON Aboriginal Project poster, 1999
11. ACON HIV advocacy postcard, 1990



KEY TO IMAGES		
1	Community Support Network volunteers, 1985	
2	3	4
5	6	7
8	9	

- 1. Community Support Network volunteers, 1985
- 2. ACON's first Mardi Gras Float, 1986
- 3. Fun & Esteem workshop, 1993
- 4. Out West support group, 1994
- 5. ACON's Positive Women
- 6. Mardi Gras parade float, 1996
- 7. Former Bingay Hostess Mitzi Macintosh with Bingay's original barrel boy, 1999
- 8. Mature Age Gay members, 2004
- 9. Candlelight memorial, 2005
- 10. Red Ribbon volunteers, 2006



■ PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The Sum Of **Us**

Mark Orr

From the last 25 years, there are countless stories to be told about the impact of HIV/AIDS – many sad, many inspirational, some joyous, but all precious to the people and communities affected by the virus. However, perhaps the greatest story would have to be the grand coalition of people, groups, communities, institutions and governments here in NSW that has achieved what is universally regarded as one of the most effective responses to HIV/AIDS anywhere in the world.

For a quarter of a century, ACON has been a key protagonist in this story and has made a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of our community. But this would not have been possible without the bravery, determination, respect and commonsense which have underpinned the HIV/AIDS partnership in NSW from the earliest days of the epidemic.

So it is with much gratitude and great sincerity that we thank the thousands of people and organisations which have contributed to or participated in ACON's work over the last 25 years. To our staff, Boards, members, volunteers and supporters, we thank you for your time, effort, expertise and support. To all our organisational stakeholders, especially the successive NSW governments, NSW Health, Positive Life NSW, researchers and clinicians, we thank you for your remarkable and committed collaboration. And finally to our clients and community members, thank you for caring for each other and working with us to build the health and wellbeing of our community.

Over the last 25 years, ACON has evolved



to meet the changing needs and circumstances of the GLBT community and people with, at risk of or affected by HIV, including sex workers and people who inject drugs. However, the one constant among all the transformation has been a desire to work with and support the people who we proudly claim as our community – people who have been, and continue to be, denied opportunities and services on the basis of their sexuality, HIV status, gender identity, sex work or drug use. Caring for our community means building the health and wellbeing of the people we serve and ACON does this through a range of health promotion services as well as by influencing government policy and participating in legislative reform.

ACON's evolution will continue into the future as our programs and services adapt to whatever challenges and opportunities lie ahead, be they medical, social, political, or technological. But whatever issues we confront, I'm sure they'll be addressed with the courage, empathy, diversity, equality, partnership and community which has guided the work of ACON through 25 years of caring for our community.

Mark Orr is the President of ACON.



Images from ACON's social inclusion project 'This Is Oz'. Go to thisisoz.com.au

ACON SERVICES

INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Every year, ACON produces and distributes a comprehensive range of GLBT health promotion campaigns and resources inc. 270,000 safe sex packs for both men and women.

DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES

ACON works with all kinds of people, groups and communities throughout NSW and in the Asia Pacific to support them in building the knowledge, skills and networks that can help improve their health and wellbeing.

COUNSELLING

ACON offers free one-to-one counselling for all members of our community as well as an after hours service and group therapy programs.

ENHANCED PRIMARY CARE

ACON helps people with complex or multiple health issues by coordinating their treatment and improving their access to relevant services.

POSITIVE HEALTH + TREATMENTS INFORMATION

ACON provides comprehensive information about living well with HIV including treatments, complementary therapies and dealing with side effects.

HOME-BASED CARE

ACON's trained volunteer carers assist people with HIV to live independently by providing practical home-based support and transport services.

POSITIVE LIVING CENTRE

Health promotion centre in Surry Hills in Sydney where people with HIV can take part in a range of programs, skills building courses, special events and social activities.

THE LUNCHEON CLUB

Health promotion centre in Waterloo in Sydney where disadvantaged people with HIV can get free meals, groceries and healthcare assistance.

HOUSING SERVICE

ACON provides short-term accommodation for GLBT or HIV+ people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness plus advice in relation to rental accommodation and public housing.

VITAMINS SERVICE

ACON supplies a range of vitamins and supplements at discounted prices to people with referrals from their GPs.

ANTI-VIOLENCE PROJECT

Whether it's on the street, in the home or at the workplace, ACON works with the NSW Police and local councils to reduce violence against members of our community.

SUBSTANCE SUPPORT SERVICE

ACON provides free in-house GLBT-focused counselling and support services for people with problematic drug use.

NEEDLE AND SYRINGE PROGRAM

ACON provides free clean injecting equipment to people who inject drugs plus information on safe drug use as well as referrals to treatment facilities.

ACON ROVERS

This team of trained volunteers attend parties and community events to help people who may be experiencing problems due to alcohol and drug use.

LESBIAN HEALTH

ACON provides a range services and support groups for lesbians and same-sex attracted women.

Sex Workers Outreach Project

ACON provides health promotion information and services for sex industry workers.

KNOWLEDGE CENTRES

ACON's libraries contain a wealth of information about GLBT health and wellbeing with a strong focus on HIV/AIDS plus free internet access.



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OTHER ACON OFFICES

Hunter, Illawarra, Northern Rivers,
Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie, Sex
Workers Outreach Project, Positive
Living Centre, The Luncheon Club