

**Reflections on my time at ACON**  
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**President 1994-96**

When I became President in 1994 it was a very challenging but also hopeful time in the history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Many were sick and far too many were dying. However, there was the emerging promise of combination therapies, which finally seemed to offer real hope of an end to the epidemic. But at the time I became President they were bogged down in trials and regulatory approval processes.

I vividly remember one of my first duties was to chair a large meeting of people living with HIV/AIDS to discuss what we could do to fast track approvals in the face of a cautious Commonwealth bureaucracy and timid politicians. The people in that room were desperate; they were facing death and didn't care if there were risks in taking these new drugs – what was the alternative?

One of the lessons I drew from this period was the power of the community working in its different ways. ACON was in some ways a conservative organisation. We worked with governments and other institutional stakeholders. That was a vital role, there needed to be a way of having serious and, at times, very pragmatic discussions.

Just as important were the bomb-throwers, the outspoken, even outrageous members of the community who helped raise issues and make sure no one was ever not aware that this was a crisis. It wasn't always a harmonious alliance.

In the short-term the State Government, in the form of Andrew Refshauge, came to the rescue with funding to release drugs even though they did not have full TGA approval. Then, of course, the drugs were approved and made officially available saving thousands of lives.

Another other abiding memory was of dealing with an important issue but one which, for me, had a surreal air to it. That was negotiating with the owners and managers of sex on premises venues for the Code of Conduct, which exists to this day. The problem for me was that, not being a frequenter of such places, my knowledge was theoretical rather than practical.

So, I discussed placement of lube dispensers and appropriate levels of lighting for dungeons, relying on imagination and common sense rather than practical knowledge. Fortunately, some of the ACON staff involved had an understanding grounded in experience.

Dawn O'Donnell took me on a tour of Signal just before it opened and said, "Bruce, isn't this the best you've ever seen?" Hand on heart I could agree with her – not that I would have dared disagree with Dawn in any event!

ACON is amazing institution that has served its communities well over thirty years. All praise should go to the staff and volunteers who have been the heart and soul of the place. I couldn't reflect on my time on the Board without mentioning the extraordinary role played over such a long period by Don Baxter and by some of the wonderfully dedicated board members, but especially David Buchanan.

It's fair to say that there would not be a community if ACON had not held it together through the dark days of the HIV/AIDS crisis. I am confident that it will continue to change and evolve to meet the needs of the LGBTQI community of NSW.