

Bruce Meagher

ACON President 1994 - 96

1) What impact did ACON have on the lives of GLBT people and people affected by HIV/AIDS during your time as president/CEO?

My term 1994-96 was a time of great change and challenge for the community. It was at the pivot point when combination therapies were producing positive results in trials but were not yet widely available. Getting access to these drugs at affordable prices and educating people living with HIV/AIDS in their effective use was a significant challenge but clearly one that was ultimately successful. Secondly, the term saw a change in government at the State and Federal level. ACON was instrumental in maintaining a broadly bipartisan approach to HIV/AIDS funding and support. Two doctors, Refshauge and Wooldridge, were as good health ministers as we could have hoped for. Andrew Refshauge took some important steps in funding access to drugs and Michael Wooldridge delivered a third national strategy that, while not perfect from ACON's point of view, allowed the effective response to the epidemic to continue.

2) What were the greatest challenges that ACON had to face during your time as president/CEO?

Our greatest challenge by far was pushing to make combination therapies available as soon as possible while at the same time managing community expectations about the processes that would inevitably be involved in making that happen. The most awful experience I had as President was my very first public meeting. The room was full of people living with HIV/AIDS who were desperate to get access to drugs that could save their lives but who could not because they had not gone through all the approval processes. I could promise that we would lobby and argue for fast access and a massive expansion of trials - but ultimately I could not give them the reassurance they so desperately needed and deserved. Many of the people in that room would survive because of the new drug regime - sadly for too many it would become available too late. The emergence of the euthanasia debate was highly controversial and one that threatened to undermine support for ACON in the broader community. It had to be managed with great care.

3) What were ACON's greatest achievements during your time as president/CEO?

I think the work that was done dealing with the combination therapies issues and the move the third national strategy was critical. We also moved to the current ACON building in Commonwealth Street which made a huge difference to the organisation. Underpinning all of this was the fact that we managed to maintain focus on a range of issues related to the epidemic and other matters (education, discrimination, community support etc) despite the fact that after 10 years there was a sense of near exhaustion given that the HIV/AIDS affected community had been living a crisis for all of that time. The build up of grief and loss was palpable and the fact that ACON and the community stayed positive and motivated was truly remarkable.

4) What was it like working at ACON during your time as president/CEO?

My overwhelming recollection was of the dedication and commitment of the staff and volunteers of the organisation. People gave above and beyond what could reasonably be required of them. I also remember the passion - sometimes too much passion from certain directions but even that, with the benefit of hindsight, was truly admirable.

5) What is your favourite 'ACON moment'?

My weirdest experience was negotiating the sex on premises code of conduct with venue owners and managers. I held several lengthy and detailed meetings about how and where condoms and lube should be available, what level of lighting there should be etc never having been to any of their venues. I understood the theory, but had no practical knowledge. I think we came to a very beneficial outcome despite my ignorance!