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## **Washington Notebook Day 1: Interview with John Cohen Kaiser Family Foundation July 20, 2012**

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**JACKIE JUDD:** Welcome to Washington Notebook. I'm Jackie Judd with the start of what will be a series of interviews highlighting notable developments at the International AIDS Conference. First up with a preview of the conference is Jon Cohen of Science Magazine, it's always great to see you at these conferences Jon.

**JON COHEN:** Great to see you too Jackie.

**JACKIE JUDD:** You have been reporting from these conferences for a very, vey long time. First time in the United States in 22 years, my question is; does it matter to a host country that these conferences are there?

**JON COHEN:** I think it does and I think if we look back historically at the impact in 2000 of the meeting being in Durbin, the first time it was in Sub-Saharan Africa it was huge. It drew the attention of the world to the problem there and it drew the attention of South Africans to the problem there in a way that it never had before.

I think we saw the same thing in Bangkok where there was a focus on Asia like never before and we saw the same thing in Mexico with the focus on Latin America like never before. You might wonder why that would matter in the United States, but in many ways the epidemic here has been pushed to the back burner and forgotten and I think the world's eyes on the

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epidemic in this country will be pretty surprising for a lot of people.

**JACKIE JUDD:** In preparation for the conference you traveled across the country reporting on the face of the U.S. epidemic, and I'm wondering-it's in Science Magazine, I'm wondering what kind of takeaways you had that you might not have expected going in?

**JON COHEN:** I started to cover this epidemic full time really in like 1989, 1990. It was a much different epidemic, it surfaced in big cities, largely economically stable gay younger men, mixture of white, black, Latino. It's now predominantly driven by young, black men who have sex with men in the Deep South. Here in Washington D.C. there's a big problem, injecting drug users were a major problem in New York City when I started to cover this epidemic. It's not really a big problem in New York City now.

You've seen both the change in population of risk groups that are becoming infected, as well as the demographic of racial and the links to poverty are much stronger now too to other substances than injecting drug use, meth amphetamine for example. I was very surprised by how difficult it is for so many people to stay in care and take their medication.

**JACKIE JUDD:** That gets to something that you wrote about and we should expect to hear through the week of the

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conference, something called The Treatment Cascade. What is that?

**JON COHEN:** I think it's really the center of the universe right for HIV/AIDS. In the United States there are approximately 1.2 million infected people, of those 80-percent know they're infected, but only 28-percent are taking antiretroviral medication every day and fully suppressing their virus. We now know that treatment both extends your life for decades and it makes you much less infectious, so the goal is to have everyone fully suppressed to really bring the epidemic to a halt.

But we're only at 28-percent, so what's wrong? That's the Treatment Cascade, it goes from finding out your infected, linking to care, staying in care, starting on medication, staying on medication. At every step in that cascade people are falling by the wayside and that's what my package of stories at, why and what can be done about it?

**JACKIE JUDD:** Will we learn new things about how to change what you just described, when people fall out of the cascade?

**JON COHEN:** Yes some of the things are incredibly practical and - helping people with their housing for example, helping people with transportation to get to a clinic, helping people who have substance problems with their substance abuse. One of the interesting things to me is that this now links the

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United States to the rest of the world in a way that is novel, everyone's wrestling with this in Zimbabwe, in Thailand.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Same issue -

**JON COHEN:** Same issue.

**JACKIE JUDD:** - around the world.

**JON COHEN:** It's hard for human beings to take medications every single day for the rest of their lives. We all know that, everyone who's ever had an antibiotic, did you finish them? Anyone who has chronic disease, do you remember to take your heart pill every day? It's tough especially when you have a disease that doesn't jump out at you like diabetes let's say, where if you don't take your insulin you end up in the hospital.

**JACKIE JUDD:** It sounds like it's a more nuanced, deeper look at what we used to simply call access issues.

**JON COHEN:** It is, but access meant money, could I afford to get this drug? Well now in much of the world you can take one pill a day, it'll cost \$100 per person a year. It's not a monetary issue for most people, it's a question of okay, you have access but are you going to take advantage of this?

**JACKIE JUDD:** Final question, getting back to the conference itself, are you expecting any breakthrough science to be announced?

**JON COHEN:** Well that's the beauty of this conference. I go in expecting to find nuggets everywhere and I usually do. No, there's no one big thing that I know about. I think we're going to learn some startling statistics about how the virus is spreading in the United States. I think we're going to hear an

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amplification of some messages that have come out, some research findings that have come out in the past year.

I don't know anything right now that is going to speak to cure, or vaccine, or the big, big questions that remain.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Okay, well you'll come back and share those nuggets with us.

**JON COHEN:** Great.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Thank you for watching. Throughout the week we will be posting interviews with Jon as well as Kaiser's HIV Policy Director, Jennifer Kates and newsmakers. We hope you will join again, I'm Jackie Judd.

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