

International Conference on Women and Infectious Diseases

Marian McDonald,*¹ Martha Anker,†¹ Carolyn Deal,‡¹ Alison Mawle,*¹ Siobhán O'Connor,*¹ and Larisa Slaughter*

On February 27–28, 2004, scientists, clinicians, researchers, women's health advocates, educators, policymakers, and representatives from nongovernmental organizations and community-based organizations gathered in Atlanta for the first International Conference on Women and Infectious Diseases (ICWID): From Science to Action. The Office of Minority and Women's Health of the National Center for Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), spearheaded the conference. It was cosponsored by the World Health Organization, the Pan American Health Organization, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and the American Society for Microbiology.

The broad ICWID steering committee included representatives from the DHHS Office on Women's Health, the National Institutes of Health Office for Research on Women's Health, the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, the Fogarty Center, and the Office of Women's Health of the Health Resources and Services Administration. Academic, community-based, and philanthropic organizations as well as numerous CDC entities were involved. The conference's goal was to enhance prevention and control of infectious diseases among women worldwide. The conference's 400 attendees from 25 countries (both industrialized and developing nations) and 30 U.S. states recognized the need for a forum to address the complex set of concerns and issues surrounding women and infectious diseases.

Julie Gerberding, director of CDC and administrator of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, opened the conference with an overview of the impact of infectious diseases on women. The address reminded listeners of the female face of infectious diseases: women may be biologically more susceptible to certain infections and suffer more severe complications. Other keynote speakers included Paul DeLay of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, Carol Bellamy of the United Nations Children's Fund, and Mirta Roses Periago of the Pan American Health Organization.

*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia, USA; †World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland; and ‡National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, USA

¹Served as guest editors for ICWID section.



Marian McDonald

Dr. McDonald serves as associate director for Minority and Women's Health, National Center for Infectious Diseases, CDC. She chaired the International Conference on Women and Infectious Diseases: From Science to Action, held in Atlanta February 27–28, 2004. She has worked in women's health and minority health for 3 decades.



Martha Anker

Ms. Anker has just retired from 25 years at the World Health Organization but continues to be active in research. She has researched gender issues throughout her career, most recently working on the effects of sex and gender on disease transmission and control during outbreaks of epidemic-prone infectious diseases.



Carolyn Deal

Dr. Deal is chief of the Sexually Transmitted Infections Branch, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health. She has worked at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, the Office of Vaccines Research and Review, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.



Alison Mawle

Dr. Mawle serves as vaccine coordinator for the National Center for Infectious Diseases, CDC. She began her career at CDC more than 20 years ago as an immunologist in the fledgling AIDS immunology laboratory.



Siobhán O'Connor

Dr. O'Connor serves as assistant to the director for Infectious Causes of Chronic Diseases, National Center for Infectious Diseases, CDC. She is active in developing the research agenda for and a strategic approach to this cross-cutting area, with known and potentially unrecognized impact on women.



The theme of the conference was “From Science to Action.” In 35 sessions, attendees discussed the practical application of scientific knowledge in areas such as HIV, infectious causes of chronic diseases and other infectious disease–chronic disease relationships, gender roles in infectious disease transmission and prevention, sexual coercion and its effect on infectious diseases in women, sexually transmitted diseases, health disparities, healthcare workers and caregivers, immunization, effective community-based strategies, the role of cultural competence in women’s health, and more.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation sponsored 26 ICWID scholarships, which allowed persons from non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations from 10 countries and four continents to attend who otherwise would not have had the opportunity. These ICWID scholars will amplify the conference’s impact by taking the knowledge and insights gained back to their home countries and organizations.

The conference successfully illuminated the female face of infectious diseases. While celebrating successes in the prevention and control of prenatal and neonatal Group B *Streptococcus* infections and achievements in other arenas, participants emphasized the many challenges remaining for the future. With the continuation of such efforts, the newly spotlighted female face of infectious diseases can also be the face of hope and progress.

Address for correspondence: Marian McDonald, National Center for Infectious Diseases, CDC, 1600 Clifton Road NE, MS D62, Atlanta, Georgia, 30333, USA; fax: 404-371-5487; email: zzm0@cdc.gov

The Woman at the Dig

Tired from running a combine
all day through acres of wheat,
alone in front of the TV, I pay
attention because the show’s about
scientists digging up an ancient site.
I have no special interest in bones,
pottery, spearheads, or prehistoric
garbage dumps, and I always look past
the man describing animal migrations,
burial rites, or building design and try
to catch a glimpse of the women
working at the site – one of them
might be wearing cut-off jeans
and a halter top, clearing a patch
of ground with a trowel or brush.
These women are all experts.
You can tell by the way they look
at a bone chip or a pottery shard
they understand worlds about
the person who left it. Sifting soil,
they show more grace than contestants
in a Miss Universe pageant.
Years from now, when these farms
are ancient history, an expedition
with such a woman might come along.
I could drop something for her to find,
a pocketknife, a brass overalls button.
If only she could discover my bones.
My eyes would be long gone,
But I can see her form coming into focus
above me as she gently sweeps aside
the last particles of dust – her knee, thigh,
hip, shoulders, and finally, set off by sky
and spikes of sunlight, her face – a woman
who recognizes what she’s found.

Leo Dangel (b. 1941)

From *The Crow on the Golden Arches*,
Spoon River Poetry Press, 2004.
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