

# OFID sponsors participants at AIDS 2008

## Scholarship winners describe experience

The XVII International AIDS Conference was one of the biggest and most important global events of 2008. Among the 24,000 delegates in attendance were some 900 people whose participation was made possible through the AIDS 2008 Scholarship Program. Around 100 scholarships were funded from OFID's Special Grant Account for HIV/AIDS Operations. Below, three of the inspirational young scholarship winners describe their work in the AIDS arena and explain what a valuable experience the conference was.

PHOTOS: A. HAYLINS



**Meera Singh**, 27, has a Master's in Life Sciences and is currently pursuing her PhD at the National AIDS Research Institute in Pune, India, where she has a 5-year fellowship.

### How are you involved in HIV/AIDS?

I've been interested in AIDS research since doing my Master's. It's an area that needs a lot of attention. For my PhD, I am examining specific cells called *dendrite cells*, which play an important role in generating the body's primary immune response. When someone is infected with HIV, the ability of the dendrite cells to mount an immune response is impaired. The virus also interferes with the communication process that takes place between the dendrite cells and other cells of the immune system. So, I am examining, on a molecular level, how the HIV virus hampers this process.

### What does this opportunity mean to you?

I wouldn't have been able to attend AIDS 2008 without a full scholarship. So, it means everything to me to be here. It's my first international exposure, and I've learned so much from all the different people I've met. Seeing the work that they're doing has given me ideas about what I should do after I finish my PhD.

### What do you hope to gain from this experience?

Now that I'm close to finishing my PhD, I've started thinking about my post-doctoral, and I would like to have experience working outside India, either in Europe or the USA. At AIDS 2008, I'm having the opportunity to network and see what opportunities there

might be; who might have a position for me in their lab. The experience has also given me great encouragement. The feedback I got from my poster presentation has made me realise that I can achieve something; that I have the potential to do some good work in this field.

### How do you plan to use this experience in your work back home in India?

The experience has actually made me think about whether I want to continue with basic research or whether should I go out into the field and do something tangible.

### What commitments would you like to see coming out of the conference?

I'm involved in basic research. But after attending all the sessions here, I understand that it is very important to increase awareness in people about this disease. If we have increased awareness then we can fight it better. Scientists are working on finding a cure, but in the meantime we have to reduce the incidence and prevalence of HIV and AIDS. I admire the courage of all the people I've met here who have the disease and are working to raise awareness. I definitely think all of us should do our best to support their efforts.



**David Damba**, 30, works as a data management officer at the AIDS Support Organization of Uganda (TASO). He holds a BSc in Quantitative Economics and is currently studying for a Master's in Biostatistics from Hasselt University, Belgium.

#### How are you involved in HIV/AIDS?

I've been working at TASO for three years in the development of data collection tools for use by front-line medical staff, and in the organization, analysis and management of the received data. My job is about improving the quality of care of people living with HIV and AIDS using a computerized data management system for appointments and follow-up. The system is mainly for patients who are on anti-retroviral therapy, and it helps us keep track of people who are not taking their drugs or who have other issues. We can then follow-up with specialized staff to offer the care and support the client needs. The system is working very well.

#### What does this opportunity mean to you?

I've always taken an interest in international platforms, where people share ideas and experiences, bring up new issues for concern, and then point out new directions in HIV care. So I really appreciate this opportunity, which has been made possible only by the scholarship scheme.

#### What do you hope to gain from the experience?

I've learned a lot about the many different models that are being developed in the area of data collection and

management. It has been interesting, too, to hear about emerging issues in the areas of treatment, prevention and combination therapy, for example. I also like the fact that participants have the freedom to ask questions and trigger discussions. All in all, it's been an inspiring experience.

#### How do you plan to use this experience in your work back home in Uganda?

There have been some excellent presentations on systems development – parameters, indicators, etc. – to improve patient follow-up. This new knowledge will definitely be very helpful.

#### What commitments would you like to see coming out of the conference?

I'd like to see some landmarks on the direction to be taken. We should drop what isn't working and continue with what is working. We also need to see more money invested in research to learn more about HIV and AIDS.



**Gabriela Costa Chaves** from Brazil is a 28-year old pharmacist with a Master's in Public Health. She works for the NGO ABIA (*Associação Brasileira Interdisciplinar de AIDS*) as a project assistant with the *Working Group on Intellectual Property*.

#### How are you involved in HIV/AIDS?

For my Master's, I studied the implications of intellectual property rights on access to medicines, and I'm now working with an NGO on this issue. Brazil has a policy of universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS, but it's a policy that's difficult to sustain because of the challenges raised by the issues of patent and monopoly, and the resulting high cost of the latest medicines. We are engaged in advocacy work to publicize this problem and are battling with the pharmaceutical companies to try to change the way things are done.

#### What does this opportunity mean to you?

I think I'm very lucky, because this is my second scholarship. My first experience at AIDS 2006 in Toronto was really inspiring, as it helped me to see where I would like to be in the whole AIDS context. This time I'm here as an activist and I've participated in many forums.

#### What do you hope to gain from the experience?

I see AIDS 2008 as the international space where local groups can share experiences, compare problems and try to find collective solutions. And we've already achieved something here. We've had several informal meetings with other groups and we are planning how to share in-

formation and how to make the language of patent issues easier. The networking has been concretized, so there is a way forward. I also see the conference as an opportunity to learn about other issues. In this way, we are able to strengthen our capacities.

#### How do you plan to use this experience in your work back home in Brazil?

We have medicines that we want to attack, and we are learning a lot from the experiences of India and Thailand, so we will be developing this kind of information sharing. Also, we've developed in Brazil several booklets and other kinds of information that we want to send to these countries.

#### What commitments would you like to see coming out of the conference?

I think we need to recognize that access to treatment is a human right and should be provided by the state. Many countries, like Brazil, are advanced in this regard, but other countries still operate co-payment systems that make treatment too expensive for the majority. We need to change this way of thinking and recognize that universal access is the principle that will move us forward. ■