



# Sir Gus Nossal: time to eradicate poverty and disease

by Bruce Duncan

One of Australia's leading medical scientists insists that we can make rapid progress in eliminating many infectious diseases in developing countries, save millions of lives, and help substantially in raising living standards.

Sir Gus Nossal, Director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research from 1965 to 1996, and Australian of the Year in 2000, was the keynote speaker to highlight Anti-Poverty week at the Knox Centre, East Melbourne, on 19 October.

Sir Gus outlined the astonishing progress made in eliminating some major infectious diseases: smallpox earlier on, and more recently polio, almost. In 1988, polio claimed 350,000 victims in 125 countries, but following the largest health campaign ever, polio had been reduced to 1900 cases in Asia and Africa by 2000. Mopping-up was continuing in the hope of eliminating the disease entirely.

The polio program was coordinated through the World Health Organisation, and over 20 years, involved 200 countries and 20 million volunteers, and immunised 2 billion children. It was a resounding success that could be emulated in other areas of disease control.

After making outstanding contributions in his field of immunology, Gus Nossal in 1993 was asked to head an advisory group for the World Health Organisation, and became involved in efforts to raise funds for major vaccination campaigns. In 1997, he approached the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for support, and

became chair of the Gates Children's Vaccination Program. From an initial grant of \$100 million, the Gates Foundation continues to fund health and immunisation programs, from a capital fund that has now reached \$2 billion.

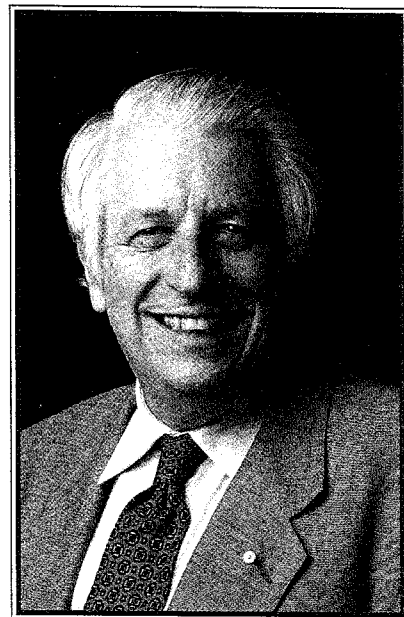
Sir Gus was very active in developing the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation in January 2000, targeting the 74 poorest countries, and so far reaching 70 of them. He estimated that 2.7 million lives could be saved: from measles, 800,000; hepatitis B, 600,000; Hib, 400,000; pertussis, 300,000; and tetanus, 240,000.

## Supports Millennium Goals

Sir Gus strongly supports the UN Millennium Goals to halve the extent of hunger and the most acute poverty in developing countries by 2015 (from the 1990 base figure), to bring 130 million more children into schools, and to strengthen the institutional framework in all aspects of governance, finance, law and education.

Sir Gus said that health involved much more than the absence of illness, and must begin with social justice in the international context. He instanced the Marshall Plan after World War II which gathered the resources to rebuild Europe and widen economic prosperity, as an example of what could be done now to eradicate hunger and the worst forms of poverty.

He quoted his friend, James Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, speaking in Melbourne in February this year, that the world spends a trillion US dollars a year on



Sir Gus Nossal

defence, well over \$300 billion a year on agricultural subsidies, but only \$50-60 billion on international development assistance. Nossal concluded: 'A person visiting us from Mars would think we are all quite mad!'

Better health outcomes were a key driver for lifting living standards, he said. Many infectious diseases in developing countries were easily preventable with vaccinations. Eradication of such diseases would increase economic productivity, improve educational outcomes and reduce much human suffering.

Sir Gus quoted studies that estimated an extra annual \$30 billion of donor support would fund essential interventions against infections and nutritional deficiencies, saving 8 million lives a year and leading to an economic benefit of \$186 billion a year. A new global health research fund could disburse \$1.5 billion a year to focus on research most relevant to developing countries.

Further vaccination programs could save many more lives. He highlighted a new campaign beginning in 2007 against Meningococcal A, a disease affecting 700,000 people over the last ten years, with a 10% mortality rate. The campaign has been supported by



## ANTI-POVERTY WEEK

grants from the Gates Foundation with the WHO and other organisations, at a cost per dose of only 40 cents.

Sir Gus had been Deputy Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation from 1998 to 2000, and in his Knox Centre address said it was shocking that our indigenous people had a life expectancy 20 years less than others, and that men in the age group 35-50 had a six times greater risk of mortality than other Australian men.

He lamented that there had been no real advance in reducing the problems

of suicide, abuse, drug and alcohol problems and violence. He regretted that the process of reconciliation had been pushed into the background, and called for urgent efforts to tackle problems of exclusion and deprivation endured by indigenous Australians.

In concluding, Sir Gus argued that war was not the answer to new problems of terrorism, but that the underlying problems were social and economic. He quoted a statement made by 108 Nobel Laureates of 7 December 2001, during the centenary

celebrations of the Nobel Peace Prize:

'The most profound danger to world peace in the coming years will stem not from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the world's dispossessed. Of these poor and disenfranchised, the majority live a marginal existence. If we permit the devastating power of modern weaponry to spread through this combustible human landscape we invite a conflagration that can engulf both rich and poor'.

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