

Speech: Let's pledge to do our part to end HIV

It's great to be here today at this global forum with such a global audience. And somewhat of a relief.

When George called and asked me to be part of a project that's very close to Elton John's heart, I have to admit I feared the worst.

Luckily for us all, it wasn't a musical collaboration, but Sir Elton's other great passion. And it's a passion that I share and fully support.

I pay tribute to the work Sir Elton John has done over so many years, and to the Evening Standard for your leadership and campaigning and support.

HIV and AIDS are challenges that we must rise to together. The injustice, the unfairness, and the sadness they have brought and bring to this day must be tackled by us all.

They are global challenges that require global solutions and global co-operation. But I'm here because every global solution starts locally.

Just up the road from here, in Soho, is the building where perhaps the most important, and most successful, public health campaign in history was born.

In 1986, one of my great predecessors, the Health Secretary Norman Fowler, faced a controversial health challenge. A lot of people felt helpless and there was a lot of tension.

Instead of flinching, he did the right thing and brought together medical experts and the finest minds in ad-land with one clear aim: to stop people dying of AIDS.

I was 7 years old. And I still remember the advert that came out of that meeting. I guess many of you do too.

There was a volcano erupting, a tombstone with the word 'AIDS' carved into it in huge letters and a very scary voiceover from John Hurt warning the audience: "don't die of ignorance".

And it worked. I, for one, was terrified. I didn't know what AIDS was – but, like everyone else, I found out.

That campaign saved lives. His decision showed that governments can make a difference.

It was imitated around the world. It stayed true to Fowler's principle of "fighting the disease, not the person". And it continues to inspire us about the power of public health interventions.

The Terence Higgins Trust found that countries who were slower to act still had twice as many HIV infections as the UK more than 2 decades later.

Thanks to that campaign, my generation grew up knowing AIDS was a potential death sentence.

That doesn't have to be the case anymore. Thanks to medical breakthroughs, public health campaigns, breaking down stigma and better education, AIDS is no longer a death sentence here.

I feel proud that Britain has made such progress. But when I think about what's going on elsewhere, I feel anger that our progress is not yet reflected around the world.

Just look at the statistics: 1.8m children are still living with HIV. Every week, 7,000 young women become infected with HIV.

In 2017, 940,000 people died of AIDS-related diseases. That's equivalent to all the people living in Manchester and Liverpool.

The fight against HIV is indistinguishable from the fight for equality and the fight against discrimination.

Let's not pull our punches: discrimination costs lives. Discrimination on gender or race or sexuality makes it harder for people to seek protection and help.

As Oscar Wilde said: "The road to freedom has been long and smeared with the blood of martyrs, and the fight's not over yet."

For a generation, the road to justice has been smeared with the blood of those who suffered the injustice of HIV. We have it within our grasp to end that discrimination and to end HIV, and we must not fail.

Britain demonstrated global leadership on AIDS with that ad campaign in the 1980s. And we are determined to do that again.

So today we're redoubling our commitment to act with a new global campaign.

I'm delighted this campaign is a joint effort between us in health and my brilliant colleague Penny Mordaunt in international development.

Because what the success of that campaign 30 years ago proves to me is that what we do in this city, in this country, can resonate around the world. It can make a difference.

What we do locally in London, in Delhi, in Nairobi, in Maputo, in Kiev, in Atlanta, in other cities, has an impact globally.

We're all part of the global solution to this global challenge, and none of us have all the answers or can do it alone. So I'm delighted to announce we're putting in money.

In a minute, Penny will explain what we're doing internationally, and the money we're putting in to help other nations.

But setting an example matters. So I'd like to, just for a moment, to share with you a new world-leading initiative here in the UK.

Today we're setting a new goal: eradicating HIV transmission in England by 2030. No new infections within the next decade, becoming one of the first countries to reach the UN zero-infections target by 2030.

This goal will be stretching it because it means preventing infections in higher-risk and harder to reach groups. But it is a realistic aim.

Part of our approach is our HIV Innovation Fund, which will support 13 local innovative initiatives to reduce the risk of people contracting or passing on HIV, reduce stigma and reach hard-to-reach communities.

Another part will be to review how we commission sexual health services, to make sure they are available to all.

And we're going to increase access to PrEP for people in high-risk categories. We're going to double the number of people who can receive the potentially life-saving HIV prevention drug.

The NHS is halfway through a 3-year clinical trial into PrEP, but we've decided to expand it early to include 26,000 people because the need has been far greater than anticipated.

From the ultra-local to the truly global, that's the approach we must take to eliminate AIDS.

Each nation may be at a different stage, face different challenges, possess different resources, but we share the same goal.

And let us just allow ourselves to dream that one day we can bear witness, within a generation, of going from 'don't die of ignorance' to an AIDS-free world.

That goal is now within our grasp. Let us work together to achieve it.

We will fight prejudice, we will fight wrong, we will fight evil, whether the evil of an indiscriminate virus or of an evil discriminatory heart.

We will champion the dignity of all human beings and the dignity of the human spirit. Let us pledge together: we will do our part and we will not fail.