

\$500,000 starts AIDS fundraiser

Filmmaker announces drive to collect \$25 million to put B.C. expert's plan to work in Africa

Nicholas Read, Vancouver Sun

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Last year Dr. Julio Montaner, head of the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, devised a mathematical model to cut the rate of HIV/AIDS in the developing world by 98 per cent in just two generations.

This week documentary film-maker and former Vancouver businesswoman Alison Lawton will mount a campaign to help turn that Montaner model into a reality.

Lawton, wife of Vancouver mining and movie mogul Frank Guistra, will announce today at a news conference a goal to raise \$25 million under UNICEF Canada's Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS banner, to combat HIV/AIDS in infants, young children and adolescents in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.

And in doing so, she hopes to help turn Montaner's model into a plan of action.

"It will work," Lawton said in an interview Monday. "It's just a matter of mobilizing. That's what gets me so excited about engaging and mobilizing Canadians."

Under Montaner's proposed strategy, antiretroviral drugs, the medications used currently to manage AIDS in the West, would be given to infected patients far earlier in their disease process. He argues that if they were given early enough, patients would no longer be able to transmit the AIDS virus to non-infected people at the rate they do now.

His strategy is based on the observation that new HIV infections occur mainly as a result of infected individuals with high viral loads and no program of medication, spreading their infections to others.

Putting a stop to that, he said, would take money. First, it would require getting millions of people around the world to take antiretroviral drugs earlier. But that could happen only if the necessary drugs could be made available to the people who needed them, and if those people could be persuaded to take them.

Raising that money is where Lawton comes in.

She wants to raise \$25 million to accomplish the following:

- Prevent mother-to-child HIV transmissions by making drugs available to pregnant women with HIV/AIDS.
- Provide either antiretroviral treatment or cotrimoxazole, a drug combination thought to prevent bacterial infection in people with HIV/AIDS, to 80 per cent of young children in need of them.
- Reduce the percentage of young people living with HIV/AIDS by 25 per cent by 2010.
- Protect and support children already affected by HIV/AIDS.

Lawton, who worked with former U.S. president Bill Clinton on humanitarian efforts around the civil war in Uganda, and has pledged \$500,000 of her own money to the campaign, wants to organize concerts in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver on Dec. 1, World AIDS Day, to raise funds and awareness around AIDS, and to sponsor a music video contest for young filmmakers to create the country's best music video on the subject of AIDS.

These high-profile projects, coupled with smaller events and continuing charitable investment initiatives involving stock and option transfers, should help Lawton reach her target, she hopes.

"It's a start. If Canadians see this as something that can be changed, they will become involved."

However, Lawton refuses to be drawn into a political debate over what a governmental role in the prevention of AIDS should be.

Last year Prime Minister Stephen Harper was criticized by scientists and AIDS activists for failing to appear at the World AIDS Conference in Toronto, a conference attended by both Lawton and Montaner.

"I never make any political comments," she said.

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WOMAN OF ACTION

- Alison Lawton is a documentary filmmaker.
- She is announcing a plan to raise \$25 million under UNICEF Canada.
- The money will put to work a plan by B.C.'s Dr. Julio Montaner to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS.

THE STAGGERING TOLL

- There are about 1,450 new HIV infections in children under 15 every day, mostly from mother-to-child transmission.
- A child under 15 dies of an AIDS-related illness every minute of every day.
- More than 6,000 young people aged 15-24 are infected by HIV every day.
- It is estimated that half of all new HIV infections are among adolescents and young people aged 15-24.

Source: UNICEF

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