

Ottawa finally releases drugs

# Aids activists celebrate victory

TORONTO—AIDS ACTION NOW! held a town hall meeting in Toronto on January 31 that also served as an occasion to celebrate a victory in the fight against the Government of Canada's malicious disregard of people living with AIDS. Announcing the government's newfound willingness to release the drugs aerosolized pentamidine and dextran sulphate, Dr. Michael Hulton of AANI said, "We have won a victory that will be valuable for people with all different illnesses."

The town hall meeting was organized by AANI's public action committee as a forum for community members to look at AANI's past year and to set goals and tactics for the future. The participants were primed for Hulton's announcement by first viewing the video *Testing the Limits*, about AIDS activism in New York (reviewed in the Dec/Jan issue of *Rites*) and by hearing a spirited rundown of AANI's activities since its founding meeting almost one year earlier.

Hulton related all he could on the late breaking news about AP and dextran sulphate but was unable to predict exactly what scope the government's new use of the emergency drug release program would have. It was clear though from his discussions with Ottawa that at least these two drugs would now be released when requested by a doctor for the treatment of AIDS related conditions. This does not mean that the drugs will be available through the normal channels

than originally thought. It seems that anything being developed or tested anywhere is eligible for release if a doctor feels it is useful for a patient.)

Participants in the town hall meeting greeted the good news with some relief but were quick to turn their attention to the problems still facing them. Several people spoke of the problems facing homeless people living with AIDS who cannot find decent places to live and face enormous problems in getting health care of any kind—let alone the kind of care required to deal with AIDS.

Jackie Wilson of COMBAT (Communities Organizing Mutually to Battle AIDS Together, an AIDS organization in the black community) appealed for support for their request to the City of Toronto to gather its AIDS statistics with regard to race. Wilson reported that it is very difficult to organize around AIDS in Toronto when the city does not report the number of PLWAs who are black. "Black people are the majority of people with AIDS around the world but in Toronto we cannot even find out the number of black people with AIDS" said Wilson.

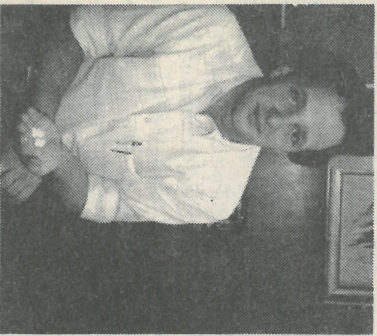
Another member of the audience touched a chord in everyone there when she talked about the head of the Federal Centre for AIDS, "Alastair Clayton is a national disgrace. We should find a way to get that bastard fired!"

One theme that had been part of previous AANI meetings' reappeared when one participant complained of the terrible care people were receiving at Toronto General Hospital. He went on to suggest that a demonstration or picket be held at the hospital to draw attention to the abysmal care that many PLWAs receive there.

Another idea that was discussed as a way of getting more information out across the country about the options that are available to PLWAs was producing more material in French. One participant spoke of the state of AIDS information in Quebec where he reported there is nowhere near as much information as English speaking Canadians have and concluded his remarks by telling us that "French Canadians should know that they can live too."

Another participant, a student from York University, reported that he had been told to drop one of his courses by his instructor because he had AIDS. In an effort to confront this he had had to telephone 22 different lawyers before he was able to find one who would take his case and start legal action against the university.

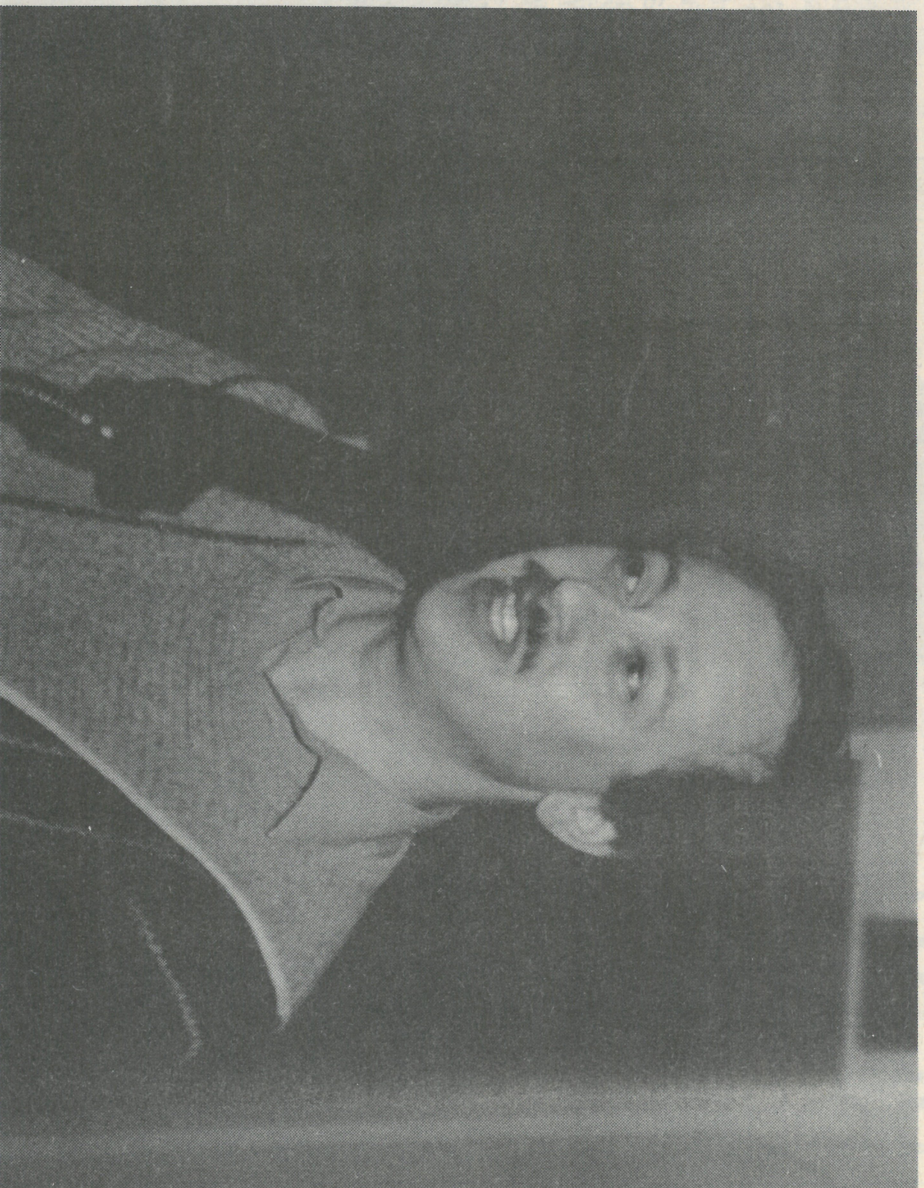
People spoke of many of the things that they liked about AIDS ACTION NOW! such as the newsletter AIDS ACTION NEWS and some of the public actions. There was also criticism about how it has sometimes been difficult to



Released drug dextran sulphate.

through which one can get other "approved" drugs but rather only upon special request to the emergency drug release program in Ottawa and only if a drug company is willing to release it. It also means that the drugs will not automatically be covered by drug plans, although there is some hope that people will be able to get the drugs covered through some plans, even possibly welfare. AP will now be available in Canada at a price substantially lower than many Canadians had already been paying in the United states, but it is still a price that will make it unavailable to some PLWAs.

Information obtained from the federal government after the AANI meeting indicates that the scope of the changes in the emergency drug release program are even greater



Dr. Michael Hulton of AIDS ACTION NOW! announces the release of drugs at Town Hall meeting Jan 31.

get involved in the organization and one person suggested that AANI was becoming bureaucratized. AANI is attempting to get more involvement by all its members by having a membership coordinator who will attempt to match people to the kind of work that they want to do.

One major task for the next 4 months is to organize around the international AIDS conference in

Montreal in June. AANI is taking the lead in contacting other organizations who may want to participate in actions at that time. Activists are hoping that protests will force action on an international level. Outside action will be required to push the officials meeting inside to take stronger action.

The combination of the good news from Ottawa, which showed that our actions in the past year

were effective, and many good ideas about what to do in the next year left people with the feeling that AIDS ACTION NOW! will continue to play a decisive role in AIDS organizing in Canada and that that organizing will be able to bring even more results. Many participants also indicated that they would be more involved in our struggles in the coming year.

Patrick Barnholden

## AIDS TREATMENTS RELEASED

Health and Welfare Canada is making experimental AIDS drugs available on compassionate grounds through its Emergency Drug Release Program.

Pentamidine, dextran sulfate and others can now be obtained through your doctor.

If you or your doctor feel a particular treatment may be of benefit to you, your doctor may request its release by contacting the Emergency Drug Release Program in Ottawa at (613) 993-3105.