

THE CONVERSATION

18 July 2014, 6.00am AEST

Media reports of HIV can be part of the problem – or the solution

AUTHOR



Trevor Cullen

Associate Professor & Head of Journalism at Edith Cowan University



Despite the increase in HIV diagnoses, media coverage of this important health issue remains patchy and sensationalist. Flickr: Tom, CC BY-NC

Research has shown that if used effectively, the media can play an important role in lessening fear and stigma about HIV – the biggest obstacles to seeking information and treatment about the disease. Yet media coverage of this important health issue remains patchy and sensationalist.

Take the case of the western Victorian dentist who discovered they were HIV-positive, for example. The dentist alerted authorities and complied with the guidelines by agreeing not to perform exposure-prone procedures. There were no reports of any infection control breaches but health department urged some patients to undergo precautionary HIV tests.

The Daily Mail led the story with:

A patient felt “sick in the stomach” when she learnt she had potentially been exposed to HIV during a medical procedure in a Victorian town.

This story reflects a common pattern of how the media cover HIV; the story is highly unusual with a strong element of fear. There is no attempt to provide a context or evaluate the actual risk. Maybe there is not enough space or time.

Waning interest

Apart from such sensational stories, HIV in Australia fell off the media radar some years ago and now it is only unusual stories and events like World AIDS Day and the forthcoming AIDS2014 conference in Melbourne that are reported.

This is to be expected and follows the pattern American researcher Anthony Downs once described as the “issue-attention cycle” of interest, peak and decline in media coverage of long term illnesses such as cancer.

Downs described the media as suffering from attention-deficit syndrome when it came to covering cancer. And there are many similarities with the coverage of HIV in Australia which began in the early 1980s but virtually vanished by the mid 1990s.

With the modern 24/7 news cycle, journalists are more reactive than proactive in terms of news gathering, and rely on receiving news and information in pre-packaged media releases or videos. This is to be expected, as they are seldom experts in the field they report on and depend on experts to share their stories.

While the media have a significant role to play in informing the public and holding governments to account, a more immediate problem is HIV fatigue: how can journalists report effectively on a disease that has been around for more than 30 years? After all, readers have been saturated with narratives of infection, suffering and death over several decades.

The reality in the newsroom is that coverage of the disease has to compete with many other issues. In recent years, under traditional news-gathering routines and standards, journalists have failed to persuade their editors to run HIV stories.

And editors do not want to be seen as merely relaying public health information. A former editor once told me that “AIDS is boring to report — somehow we need to make it interesting”.

In keeping with this exhortation, journalists' reports need to go beyond simplistic views of the global HIV epidemic as merely a crisis in public health. Reflections on the complex social, cultural and economic determinants and consequences of the epidemic add the required complexity.

Journalism or health promotion?

On a positive note, analysis of HIV reporting in the Pacific, the United States, in Southern Africa, and in parts of Asia reveal that the language and tone of HIV stories from the mid-1990s onwards show greater sensitivity to people living with HIV.

It seems editors and journalists were encouraged to amplify the voices of those infected by the disease and to increasingly report HIV as a story with medical, political, social, economic,

cultural and religious aspects.

But questions remain about the role of journalism in health promotion and development contexts. How, for example, does the media address extremely complex questions such as gender power and the connections between rising health costs and ecological sustainable development?

While this remains an ongoing debate, I still think stories that focus on the social determinants of HIV sufficiently broaden the scope and context of media coverage and lead to a better understanding and discussion of effective measures to deal with the illness.

So, is it possible to challenge the current situation?

We're trying to do this with a new pilot media education program run by Edith Cowan University in collaboration with WA Aids Council (WAAC). The program empowers people who live with HIV or who work for HIV organisations to be proactive and share their own stories and experiences with the media.

This approach is known as “health narratives” and arose out of a response to the increasingly important role that personal stories play in communication about health issues. It's a concept that encourages people to share their health experiences as a way to put a human face on a disease, and at the same time, demystify the disease and erode stigma and fear associated with it.

Ultimately, it can result in a better understanding and response to HIV.

This article is part of our coverage of the 20th International AIDS Conference, which runs from July 20 to 25. Look out for more pieces over the next few days and full coverage during the conference.