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PERSPECTIVE: A fresh approach on tackling HIV awareness in WA

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Research has shown that if effectively used, the media can lessen fear and stigma which are the biggest obstacles to seeking information and treatment about the disease.

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TO KICK off Perspectives on Science Network WA Edith Cowan University's Dr Trevor Cullen discusses the importance of effectively communicating with the media in order to present an accurate view on HIV-related issues in WA.

Diagnosis of HIV is up, but the awareness in media reporting is down. This needs to change.

In 2013, the number of HIV cases in Western Australia were the highest on record.

Royal Perth Hospital Department of Immunology physician, David Nolan, said in 2013 that the diagnosis rate for HIV was higher in WA than it was in the 1980s and that, since 2005, there has been a steady rise.

Admittedly, the figures are from a low base but the 2013 figures show no sign of slowing.

These increases are attributed to a variety of factors, such as migration, travel, online forums facilitating sexual encounters, but also because of a rise in heterosexual men and women being diagnosed.

Yet, despite the increase of HIV cases in WA communities, media coverage of this important health issue remains patchy and sensationalist.

Research ([file:///discovery/redirected\\$/nick.brant/Downloads/ejournalist2011%20\(1\).pdf](file:///discovery/redirected$/nick.brant/Downloads/ejournalist2011%20(1).pdf)) has shown that if effectively used, the media can lessen fear and stigma which are the biggest obstacles to seeking information and treatment about the disease.

The reality is that with the 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.

Besides, journalists are seldom experts in the field they report on and depend on people and experts to share their stories.

A new pilot project, Beyond the Red Ribbon: Improving HIV awareness through media education programs run by Edith Cowan University in collaboration with WA Aids Council (WAAC) in Perth, aims to fill this gap by empowering people who live with HIV or who work for HIV organisations, to be proactive and share their own stories and experiences of HIV with the media.

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Education is the key

The participants will do this through media training sessions where they learn what is “newsworthy” and how to communicate their news and stories in the media. The first session started on May 26.

In the field of health communications, this approach is known as Health Narratives, and it arose out of a response to the increasingly important role that personal stories play in communication about health issues.

It is a relatively new 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 could result in a better understanding and response to diseases.

The project has already been included in WAAC’s revised media and communications strategy.

If the pilot project is successful, it will be offered to other state-based AIDS councils throughout Australia via the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

This framework of community and media engagement that underpins the media training program, will also have broader applicability for other health promotion and disease prevention initiatives beyond HIV.

A more immediate outcome is that the media training workshops will be offered, for the same reasons, to more than 100 selected HIV leaders and ambassadors from 34 countries at the International AIDS conference in Melbourne.

Up to 15,000 delegates from 180 countries are expected to attend this conference, making it one of the largest gatherings on a health issue ever held in Australia.

Dr Trevor Cullen is an Associate Professor of Journalism at Edith Cowan University.

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