

Press coverage of HIV/AIDS in the South Pacific: delaying the inevitable

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HIV came relatively late to Papua New Guinea (PNG), the largest of the South Pacific countries. The first case was identified in 1987 and since 1995 the rate of infection has increased alarmingly. Now, PNG is on the verge of a serious HIV/AIDS epidemic. Other countries in the region could follow a similar pattern. Despite warnings from the prime minister and health officials, there is little sign of anxiety or panic on the streets of the capital, Port Moresby. Few people discuss the epidemic and no billboards or posters warn people about the dangers of the disease. The media are equally silent on the issue. Among the many newspapers in the region, most editors remain unconvinced about the impending tragedy.

At the launch of World AIDS Day 2000, PNG Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta described the HIV/AIDS situation in his country as a "silent catastrophe." Currently, PNG has almost 4000 people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAs). The prime minister warned that these figures were misleading and said that out of a population of 5.1 million between 15,000 and 20,000 people are living with the virus. The director of the National AIDS Council (NAC) warns that the massive HIV/AIDS epidemic in many sub-Saharan African countries – with HIV infection rates as high as 25% – could be repeated in PNG, which has a large sex industry, uncontrolled sexually transmitted infections (STIs), a very young sexually active population and, to a certain extent, denial in some provinces.

Surprisingly, media response has been patchy and ineffective. It seems difficult to ignite interest in a disease that has the potential to decimate the social and economic future of the country and the region. Therefore, a small-scale study was set up to find explanations from local newspaper editors for their current state of inaction.

Looking at the role of newspaper editors

In the study, newspaper editors were chosen because they wield considerable influence in the selection of news stories. A total of 25 editors were interviewed from seven South Pacific countries. The countries were deliberately selected to reflect the different ethnic groups in the region: Melanesians (Papua New Guinea and Fiji); Polynesians (Tonga and Samoa); French Melanesians (New Caledonia); French Polynesians (Tahiti) and Micronesians (The Federated States of Micronesia).

Interviews started with an open-ended request for the editors to outline their views and experience of HIV/AIDS. Then, more specific questions sought to ascertain the editorial policy on HIV/AIDS of their respective newspapers and how that policy compared with coverage of other diseases within their countries. Other questions examined how the editors viewed their role: to inform or to educate, or both. Finally, the editors were asked about future editorial policy in the light of the expected increase in HIV infections. The interviews ranged from between one to two hours.

Two editors refused to be interviewed. One complained about an over-emphasis on

HIV/AIDS and the other cited too many other commitments. Those editors interviewed expressed interest and concern about the subject. Some asked if training sessions on health reporting could be arranged for their journalists.

The editors' response: main findings

Surprisingly, more than 75% of the editors considered malaria to be a greater threat than HIV/AIDS. For this reason, most editors were unwilling to lead public debate on HIV/AIDS for fear of exaggerating its presence and influence. This may explain the lack of front-page stories and editorials about the disease.

Only some 12% of the editors were satisfied with their current knowledge of HIV/AIDS, showing a certain degree of ignorance about the disease. Although HIV/AIDS has existed in the South Pacific for at least 13 years, none of the editors had an editorial policy about a problem that has the potential to devastate the political, economic and social fabric of their respective countries. Ethnicity did not make a noticeable difference in the editors' approach to reporting HIV/AIDS. The noticeable lack of editorials about the epidemic, however, may have more to do with the lack of priority given to health issues in general. Sixteen percent of the editors said their newspaper had a health page and only 8% employed a full-time health reporter. Usually, a general reporter covered health topics.

Nearly two-thirds of the editors had not knowingly met a person living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). During the interviews, it was noticed that those editors who had encountered PLWHAs adopted a more open and concerned approach to the problem.

Difficulties editors face reporting HIV/AIDS

To understand the reasoning behind their responses, further explanation was asked from the editors. Many said that official figures for HIV/AIDS were low and this affected coverage. Editors were often handcuffed to what is described as a "quantifiable view" of importance. Also, traditional news values make it difficult for editors to view HIV/AIDS as a consistently newsworthy topic.

Criteria for selecting news include aspects of sensation, conflict, mystery, celebrity, deviance, tragedy and proximity. While news items on HIV/AIDS fit some of these categories, newspapers have been reporting it since the mid-1980s. This makes it difficult to present the disease in a constantly new and interesting way.

Due to its long shelf life and the "gloom and doom" aspect associated with HIV/AIDS, stories on the disease are frequently restricted to official government figures, workshops, overseas donations and the excellent work of local volunteers.

Closer examination of actual press coverage revealed that editors placed greater emphasis on the harmful effects of the disease, especially long-term suffering and possible death, rather than explain the risks and necessary preventive measures. Potentially, this may create a sense of helplessness that nothing will contain the spread of the disease.

Only a few news items referred to people who had died of the disease. Together with the failure to put a human face on the problem, this vague reporting framed HIV/AIDS as more of a distant theoretical disease rather than an immediate and serious health threat.

Virtually all the editors stated that cultural taboos remain an obstacle when reporting HIV/AIDS. Talking about sex or reporting someone living with or dying of AIDS are issues

that local editors and journalists prefer to avoid due to cultural pressures. Also, Christian and traditional beliefs influence public perception and understanding of the disease.

Recommendations for the near future

Understandably, editors and journalists avoid using their publications for HIV/AIDS advocacy work. They can, however, adopt a more pro-active journalistic approach by going out to get the story instead of merely waiting to comment on government press releases or local workshops organised to promote awareness of HIV/AIDS. A pro-active approach would challenge policy decision-makers to act now before the HIV/AIDS tidal waves hit shore with intense ferocity.

While everyone in society needs to play his/her part in tackling the emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic, newspaper editors in particular have enormous influence and can make a difference. They decide what news items are to be included or omitted from their publications; radio and television news editors frequently use these stories from the papers. Moreover, newspaper editors can help challenge public opinion on HIV/AIDS, often based on ignorance, fear and prejudice, which create stigma and result in a deafening silence on the issue.

Some editors in the South Pacific region should be highly commended for the way they have responded to the threat of HIV in their countries, but the time has come to step up coverage and allocate more space for information about prevention and to embarrass government officials into greater action. This is extremely difficult because of cultural sensitivities and financial sponsorship, but not impossible. It will contribute hugely to a current information campaign that sounds more like a squeaky tin whistle than a loud and continuous trumpet blast. It is time for the editors to lead from the front.

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