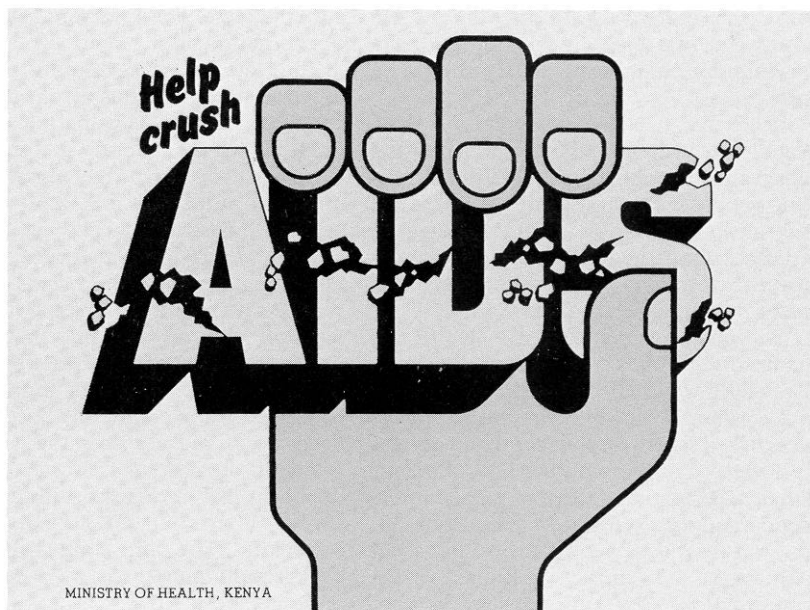


KENYA'S AIDS INFORMATION FLOW: FROM A TRICKLE TO A FLOOD



ODHIAMBO-ORLALE

In Kenya, as in some other countries, getting information on AIDS has, until recently, been nearly as difficult as finding a cure for the disease. Because of the extreme caution with which some government health officials and the print and broadcast media have handled the topic, one would have imagined it a bigger taboo to talk about AIDS than to actually contract the virus.

The Ministry of Health and the Kenya Red Cross began distributing AIDS posters to youth organizations, the Armed Forces, prisons, and public places in 1986. However, government officials remained conspicuously reserved on the subject of AIDS from February 1984, when the first case in Kenya was announced, to February 1987. During the same period, editors in the print and broadcast media handled AIDS information with extreme caution. It was "a sensitive matter".

But since the establishment of the 50 million shilling (CA\$3.7 million) national health campaign under the National AIDS Committee in early 1987, there has been a remarkable about-face in the approach to providing AIDS-related information.

When launching the national campaign in 1987, then Minister of Health Kenneth Matiba told journalists that "every person in Kenya must receive information on the prevention and control of AIDS." He maintained that an aggressive countrywide mass education program would be the most effective way to combat the spread of AIDS.

"We have to tell our people that there is no room for casual sex or promiscuity," said the minister. "We intend to use all

available channels of communication at our disposal to inform the public. This means the press, chiefs, the ruling party KANU (Kenya African National Union), youthwingers, officials, nongovernmental organizations, radio, television, schools, posters, and music."

Since the announcement, the country has been flooded with information on the deadly disease. The AIDS situation in Kenya—there were 2732 cases recorded and reported to the World Health Organization as of June 1988—is being discussed freely by print and broadcast media. There have been local and foreign news stories,

special features, editorials, and pieces by science and medical writers.

According to the Ministry of Health's national AIDS coordinator, Dr Francis Mueke, the government also has plans to advertise in the print media. "All Kenyans have the right to know all available information on AIDS," says Dr Mueke. "Each individual can make a decision to prevent transmission. So, let everyone know what AIDS is and how to prevent it."

The open dialogue has resulted in calls for both positive action to protect the general population and highly restrictive measures against people with AIDS.

BEST COMMUNICATION CHANNELS: RADIO AND WORD OF MOUTH

A recent survey by researchers in Kenya shows that radio and word of mouth are the two most important channels for communicating information about AIDS in that country.

The research team, which began its work in late 1987, was headed by Mrs Elizabeth Ngugi of the University of Nairobi's department of community health. It examined the knowledge, attitudes, and practices, with regards to AIDS, of 3639 urban and 3197 rural Kenyans.

A major outcome was a ranking of the effectiveness of various media. Radio was identified as a source of AIDS information by 66 percent of urban respondents and 61 percent of rural

respondents. "People", or person-to-person communication, ranked next, with scores of 65 percent (urban) and 58 percent (rural). Newspapers (54 and 38 percent) are also an important form of communication, followed by posters (32 and 22 percent) and magazines (22 and 13 percent). TV, at 11 and 5 percent, ranked last.

"Quite understandably, television ranks low because it is only available to a few sections of the community," says the report.

The researchers recommend, among other things, the production and broadcast of simple radio spot messages and radio lessons on AIDS. ■

Gerry Toomey

AIDS information: electronic and printed

In a letter to the editor in the *Daily Nation*, Kenya's leading daily newspaper, a contributor lamented that much has recently been written about the dreaded disease but little has been done to prevent it. He suggested that the government promote the supply and use of condoms. He also wrote that anybody who intentionally or unintentionally spreads HIV should be prosecuted.

Recently a Nairobi lawyer, A.D.O. Rachier, told an AIDS symposium that the government should pass legislation to confine people with AIDS so that they do not further spread the disease. He also suggested that laws be enacted making it mandatory for foreigners and pregnant women to be screened for the HIV virus.

The position of the World Health Organization (WHO) is that there is no public health rationale to justify isolation, quarantine, or any discriminatory measures based solely on the fact that a person is suspected or known to be HIV-infected. Since AIDS is spread through sexual intercourse and the exchange of infected blood, there is no public health hazard in casual contact, such as in the work place or social situations. WHO also says that screening travellers or demanding proof of seronegativity (absence of detectable antibodies to HIV) will not prevent the spread of AIDS.

In Kenya, one of the most debated AIDS topics has been the claims by local herbalists that they can actually cure the disease. "Over the past year, I have met six herbalists claiming to cure AIDS, but four of them had little or no evidence," says *Daily Nation* science columnist Otula Owuor. "But at least two of them seem to be doing something that at least improves the health status of the victims."

Leaflets, posters, and stickers

Since its inception, the National AIDS Committee, in conjunction with the Kenyan Red Cross, has handed out some three million leaflets, posters, and stickers in an attempt to educate the public about AIDS. The information is distributed by hand, inserted in newspapers and magazines, and posted in prominent places such as trading centres, bus-stops, and medical and educational institutions.

The three variations of the poster all convey a very simple message: "Spread facts not fear." It is printed in Kenya's two national languages, Kiswahili and English. Below this is an illustration of a hand grasping the words "Help crush AIDS" in block letters.

One version of the poster informs the public that AIDS, for which there is no cure, is not only a problem in Kenya but also around the world. The second version conveys the message that AIDS is contracted sexually, through blood transfusion, or by using contaminated syringes. The third says that people can reduce their risk of

contracting AIDS by limiting themselves to one sexual partner and avoiding prostitutes.

Plans are under way to produce posters with more graphics in order to reach the large population of Kenyans who are either illiterate or do not understand either of the national languages.

The National AIDS Committee, in conjunction with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, is using television and radio, which are state-run in Kenya, to further spread the anti-AIDS message. In addition to radio spot ads, a 30-part radio series is broadcast weekly in Kiswahili, English, and 18 local languages. Each half-hour program extols the virtues of responsible sex and is interspersed with a popular local song on the same theme.

The record, entitled "UKWIMI" on one side and "AIDS" on the flip side, was released by a Nairobi band, Them Mushrooms, in December 1987. The song, available on disk or cassette, warns the public against having sex with prostitutes, saying "Watch out! AIDS is dangerous and it can kill." The same song is also used as background music for a 30-second TV message about AIDS.

By last fall, about 2000 copies of the record had been sold or distributed free to major night clubs, radio and television stations of the Voice of Kenya, beer halls, and medical and educational centres throughout the country in an attempt to reach youth, who form the bulk of Kenya's population of 22 million.

In preparation for the first World AIDS Day last December, the National AIDS Committee prepared a 30-minute film documentary. This will be made into a video to be distributed to special interest groups in the country. The AIDS Committee also intends to hold seminars, symposia, and workshops.

For the general public, the AIDS Committee has also begun to use poetry and drama festivals to transmit its message on AIDS. Recently, a high school in Nyeri town, about 100 kilometres from Nairobi, staged a play in Kiswahili called *Tone Kwa Tone (Drop by Drop)*, produced and directed by a teacher, Joseph Warungu. It became the talk of the town and even of the district after its debut. It later received 17 awards during the provincial drama festival.

Commenting on the information role of the play, Dr Mueke said: "Mass education on AIDS is the only avenue remaining to combat this killer disease which is increasingly marching along our frontiers. This play has a tremendous impact and more people countrywide could benefit from it."

Odhiambo-Orlale is a journalist with the Daily Nation, a newspaper published in Nairobi, Kenya.

Along with the proliferation of information on AIDS, there has been a growth in the number of AIDS information services, in either electronic (online or optical discs) or printed format. The following are just a few of the many useful sources available.

Electronic

- **AIDSLINE:** This new online data base is part of the Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System (MEDLARS) at the U.S. National Library of Medicine. It is a bibliographic file focusing on biomedical, epidemiologic, social, and behavioural literature, from a variety of published documents. Contact: MEDLARS Management Section, Bibliographic Services Division, National Library of Medicine, 8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20894, U.S.A.; tel. (301) 496-6193.
- **Compact Library: AIDS:** This is an optical disc (CD ROM) available from the Medical Publishing Group, a wing of the New England Journal of Medicine, in the U.S. It contains several data bases: the AIDS Knowledge Base electronic textbook produced by the San Francisco General Hospital; the MEDLINE AIDS subset provided by the U.S. National Library of Medicine; the AIDS Data Base from the U.K.-based Bureau of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases, which is a bibliographic system containing citations and abstracts of documents from 1984 on, from around the world; and full text articles from key biomedical journals. Contact: The Medical Publishing Group, Massachusetts Medical Society, 1440 Main Street, Waltham, MA 02154-9902, U.S.A.; tel. (617) 893-3800.

Printed Matter

A number of magazines, newsletters, journals, and bibliographies are particularly of interest to readers in developing countries:

- **World AIDS**, a new magazine published by the Panos Institute in cooperation with the Bureau of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases. Contact: The Panos Institute, 8 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7EB, U.K.; tel. (01) 631-1590. The Panos Institute, in collaboration with the Norwegian Red Cross, also recently published its third and final edition of *AIDS and the Third World*, an interdisciplinary dossier described by Panos as "a comprehensive global overview of AIDS".
- **IPPF Open File**, a biweekly publication with an informative AIDS section summarizing material from newspapers and other documents, published by International Planned Parenthood Federation, International Office, Regent's College, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London NW1 4NS, U.K.; tel. (01) 486-0741.
- **Activities Update**, published by the Global Programme on AIDS (GPA), World

Health Organization (WHO), 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland; tel. 91 21 11.

- *AIDS Health Promotion and Exchange*, a quarterly newsletter for those planning, implementing, and evaluating AIDS health promotion programs, published by GPA. See address above.
- *AIDS Technical Bulletin*, a subset of the AIDS data base from the Bureau of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases, published by GPA. See address above.
- *AIDS Action*, the international newsletter for information exchange on AIDS prevention and control, published by AHRTAG, 1 London Bridge St., London SE1 9SG, U.K.; tel. (01) 378 1403.
- *AIDS: an International Bimonthly Journal*, published by Gower Academic Journals, 1201 Locust St., 2nd floor, Philadelphia, PA 19107, U.S.A.; tel. (215) 790-2266.
- *AIDS Targeted Information Newsletter (ATIN)*, abstracts and critical comments from the current literature, sponsored by the American Foundation for AIDS Research, published by Williams and Wilkins, 428 East Preston St., Baltimore, MD 21202, U.S.A.; tel. (301) 528-4000.
- *Current AIDS Literature*, an up-to-date bibliographic information service on all aspects of AIDS. The articles drawn are from 1400 international journals seen by the Bureau of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases. Prepared by the Bureau and Gower Academic Journals. See address for *AIDS: an International Bimonthly Journal*.
- *AIDS FEEDBACK*, a computerized visual representation of the status of the global AIDS pandemic, in the form of maps, charts, and graphs. It uses up-to-date numbers of AIDS cases reported to the World Health Organization from around the world. Single-page modules may be reproduced without permission. Produced several times a year by Dr R.P. Bernard, Director of Epidemiology in Human Reproduction, Field Epidemiology and Liaison Office, 22 Av. Riant-Parc, 1209 Geneva, Switzerland. ■

Compiled by Margo Hawley
IDRC Library

A research network for Africa

A group of AIDS researchers from East and Southern Africa has formed a network for sharing information and expertise. They also expect it will serve as a mechanism for conducting joint research projects.

The members of the founding group first aired the idea in Nairobi in March 1988, and met several times after that to work out the purposes and operation of the network. To date, researchers from Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have participated in the planning meetings.

African scientists and other AIDS specialists often work in relative isolation, yet are focusing on the same problems as their colleagues in neighbouring countries.

For example, the link between HIV infection and tuberculosis, risk factors for heterosexual transmission, the nature of mother-to-child transmission, the problem of condom use by prostitutes, and the impact of AIDS on the family—these are all subjects that might be tackled by inter-African cooperation.

The founding group believes the network, which has received some preliminary funding from IDRC, might also serve as a body for evaluating the effectiveness of national AIDS control programs. At the same time, it could open up opportunities for researchers to be trained in neighbouring countries in areas such as HIV screening or the execution of targeted education campaigns.

Lastly, the network could enable researchers to assist each other in developing research projects, identifying funding sources, and reviewing each others results and scientific papers.

For the time being, a team of AIDS researchers at the University of Nairobi is serving as the network secretariat. It is also responsible for publishing a newsletter for members.

For more information, contact:
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African women against AIDS

A group of African women has formed a continental organization aimed at helping women to protect themselves from AIDS.

The Society for Women and AIDS in Africa (SWAA) is particularly interested in the plight of female prostitutes, because of the high risk involved in such work.

"It's not only a matter of giving out condoms to prostitutes to give to their clients," says the Society's president, Dr Fathia Mahmoud, a Sudanese medical doctor in obstetrics and gynecology who has also been conducting AIDS research in the U.S. "We are also concerned that the social and health problems of female prostitutes should be addressed in a more scientific way. We should find solutions, we should improve their socioeconomic status. And we want to get our social scientist colleagues to help us with research in this area."

The SWAA was formed in June 1988 at the international AIDS conference in Stockholm, Sweden. Recently, its officers have been busy looking for donors to provide core funding for the young organization.

African women in general face a number of situations in which there is a high risk of HIV infection, says Dr Mahmoud. "Women are more likely to receive blood transfusions than any other group, particularly during pregnancy and childbirth."

"The Society would also like to address certain traditional practices which put

women at risk of HIV infection. For example, female circumcision, scarification, early marriage, early childbirth, and nutritional taboos. We also know that cultural and religious practices which allow African men to marry more than one wife and to have multiple sexual partners increase the risk of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases in women.

"We are trying to promote female education and address the problem of the inadequacy or absence of specific health care for women," says Dr Mahmoud. She would like to see more women in policymaking roles in these areas.

The focus of the Society's work will be to set up health education programs aimed mainly at rural women. But each will have to be tailored to local needs since "what's appropriate for Kenya won't be appropriate for Sudan," says Dr Mahmoud. To this end, the Society hopes to launch a program of social and behavioural research on women.

"We are definitely going to work with established AIDS programs such as the national committees on AIDS," says Dr Mahmoud.

Both men and women are welcome to join SWAA. A small membership fee is requested. For more information on SWAA, write to Dr Mahmoud at P.O. Box 1598, Khartoum, Sudan.

Gerry Toomey

Blaming Others

Blaming Others is a small, excellent book by Renée Sabatier, director of the AIDS unit at the Panos Institute in London. It shows how the AIDS pandemic has instigated many false accusations, usually founded on racial prejudice.

Even the scientists at the respected Centers for Disease Control in the United States classified Haitians as a high-risk group from 1982-1985. Today, experts reject the idea of high-risk groups and prefer to talk about high-risk behaviour.

Blaming Others lists the accusations that AIDS has bred. In the United States, the Haitians were blamed for the spread of the AIDS virus; in India, the authorities wanted to test all African students; in the Soviet Union and Africa, the U.S. was accused of fabricating the AIDS virus; and, of course, journalists were accused of distorting the facts.

Finally, Ms Sabatier shows us how, in the industrialized countries, AIDS affects mainly the poorest and most marginalized populations. It has also reached high levels in a number of developing countries. What seems to be shared by all those who develop AIDS is poverty. After all, AIDS is a problem of development.

Blaming Others (167 pages) can be ordered from The Panos Institute, 8 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7EB, U.K. ■

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