

## Whoever met a T-cell on the street?

*Zimbabweans insure their future with a widely accessible campaign to prevent the spread of AIDS. "We hand out straightforward information" says Ministry of Health spokeswoman.*

BY DORIS WISHER

On 3 July, 1987, as the American public launched their Independence Day fandango, the Ministry of Health in Zimbabwe kicked off an event of far-reaching consequences.

The Ministry's Health Education Department created a five-prong nationwide AIDS awareness campaign. According to a Health Education Department spokeswoman, her office began with a survey to find out what the community knows about AIDS, and based on findings, provides missing information.

"We started out with a pamphlet for health personnel and found it to be too technical. Whoever met a T-cell on the street? Now we hand out straightforward information," she said.

Zimbabwe Broadcasting Company (ZBC) airs a weekly AIDS panel discussion by doctors and other health professionals as well as broadcasting AIDS spots every evening at 6:45. The most popular and effective depicts an emaciated man lying in a hospital bed as a voice implores, "AIDS. It attacks all races and classes. Avoid casual sex."

Twice weekly, Zimbabwe Radio No. 3 airs a call-in program, "AIDS and You." The usual format follows an interview with doctors on certain topics not limited to blood transfusions, AIDS in children and symptoms and prevention of the virus in adults.

Listeners jam telephone lines asking questions on the air.

Massive mail response to the program has piled bundles of letters in the Health Education Department office in Harare.

"Listeners misinterpret what they hear on the radio. We read and answer letters on the air and others, with the same question, are satisfied," the spokeswoman said.

Detailed AIDS literature is sent in response to each letter not aired on the radio.

The Health Education Department creates and distributes a series of 2' x 4' AIDS posters. In all corners of Zimbabwe, these can be seen strategically plastered on the walls of government buildings, clinics, movie theatres, churches, schools, police stations, bus stations, beer halls, on telephone poles and sign posts.

Here is just a sampling of the more hard-hitting poster slogans:

"AIDS has no cure. Don't help to spread AIDS. Choose your partner carefully."

"Beware! Your next sexual partner could be that very special person, the one that gives you AIDS."

And yet another poster depicts two women waiting in a dark alley. It reads: "AIDS kills. Avoid multiple partners. Always insist on using condoms!"

The creators of these posters do not mince words and distribute them in English and the two major languages, Shona and Ndebele.

"We didn't have time to test these [posters] as prototypes. We borrowed partial slogans from Uganda and other countries we share information with. There is no time to spare—the word must get out," a spokeswoman said.

Lastly, the Health Education Department writes a short, concise Ministry of Health information message for national distribution in the Harare *Herald*. The messages always begin with a hideous picture of a skull and crossbones—with one minor update. One of the bones is a syringe. Each message clearly states the bare truth about AIDS, especially prevention, transmission and, of course, certain death from infection.

An excerpt, "We are fortunate in Zimbabwe in that blood used from the Transfusion Service is screened prior to use. In fact, we were the third country in the world to carry out routine testing of every single pint of blood donated. This test is carried out at every donation."

For an emerging nation like Zimbabwe, the financial expense of this action only proves the sincerity of Prime Minister Mugabe's anti-AIDS policies.

Returning to the questions Zimbabweans pose to the Health Education Department in the mails, it seems people did not know the difference between AIDS and cancer.

Another common refrain centered on prostitutes and prostitution causing AIDS. The Health Education Department has their work cut out for them in trying to clear prostitution, the planet's oldest controversial profession, as the sole transmitter of AIDS.

Many letters revealed a mixed attitude about the use of condoms. One testified that using condoms is like sucking sweets before removing the plastic wrapper. Another letter writer admitted not knowing how to use a condom.

Several comments support the thought that AIDS was brought into Zimbabwe by foreigners. To expose the enormity of the misinformation problem, an American medical researcher in Zaka district in Masvingo province in the south of Zimbabwe was approached one dusty afternoon by two grade school teachers in their 20s. Her lab coat tipped them off as to her assumed medical expertise. They politely inquired about "the dreaded disease."

The bolder of the two asked, "Is it true that AIDS is an American invention to keep Africans from having sex and not populating our continent?"

Nonplussed, the researcher stared at him in disbelief and finally replied, "Americans are trying to invent a cure. We did not invent the disease."

In the same vein, letters expressed a desire for mandatory blood testing or screening at the airport. This attitude is reminiscent of the American Midwest during the dust bowl '30s when Gypsy caravans were met at the outskirts of town and intimidated away.

Further, misinformed responders produced inquiries on transmission. People felt they could acquire AIDS by sleeping on carriers' bed sheets. The Zimbabwean drinking tradition of sipping a beer from a mug with a fellow beer drinker was posed as a feared transmitter. At the same time, people detailed their fears of shaking hands with a stranger, new friend or mere acquaintance.

Common among the inquiries was the need to know how to identify an AIDS infected individual on the street. And along with this, came volumes of inquiries about symptoms. The majority of these letters revealed panic in the hearts and minds of folks with a single perceived symptom.

"People vacillate between fear and appreciation over the information we send in response. They want us to set the record straight yet argue with our position of fact when we do," said a Health Education Department spokesman.

What it all boils down to is Zimbabweans craving information as to whether they have AIDS or not and the Health Education Department satisfying this craving.

On the provincial level, all eight provinces initiated AIDS awareness campaigns in coordination with the Ministry of Health. Workshops, town meetings, parades and mass media coordination fill out the action plan. A hopeful result is the involvement of the Youth Advisory Board in schools. These Boards of pupils disseminate information pertaining to AIDS-related prevention issues like combining condoms in Family Planning (a non-governmental nationwide program) and Sexually Transmitted Disease.

*Zimbabwe's AIDS campaign received US \$850,000 from the United States Agency for International Development. One project will fund printing of thousands of pamphlets in three languages for the Health Education Department.*

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