

The Health Education Department writes a short, concise Ministry of Health informational message for national distribution in the Harare Herald. The messages always begins with a hideous picture of a skull and crossbones — with one minor update. One of the bones is a syringe.

The Harare Junior City Council staged a demonstration in support of the fight against AIDS. Youths marched through the streets carrying posters from the Health Education Department. A spokesman for the Council said the purpose of the demonstration was to make people aware of the dangers of acquiring AIDS if they did not take precautions.

"We feel it is time that the nation learns about the consequences. All Zimbabweans should find a means to control the disease," he said.

The City of Harare created a town hall-style health center using videos in English from other Anglophone African countries for information dissemination and counseling. The target population was the individual citizen. Specifically, one program provided presentations for domestic workers over their lunch hours. According to one city employee in attendance, employers, who happen to be white were not keen to attend the so-called AIDS training.

The Ministry of Health sees the first sixty days of the campaign as a success.

"The letters coming in are generally positive. We receive a variety of perceptions and responses. People want a cure or an alternative — yet it's fashionable to collect a pair of posters to hang in the bedroom," a spokeswoman for the Ministry said.

However, at street level, graffiti emblazoned on the walls of public toilets in Harare reads, "We want to die in peace." Regardless, Family Planning distributes condoms and birth control pills free of charge throughout the country and sometimes by bicycle to rural health clinics.

A middle management executive was overheard in a Harare bar to say that everybody dies sometime. When his drinking colleague commented that he could transmit the deadly disease to his wife, the executive cursed and said that his wife could be hit by a car and killed tomorrow with or without AIDS.

In juxtaposition, *The Sunday Mail* printed a letter from a reader. It reads: "AIDS and STD are not a menace; it is human beings who are a menace to themselves. Some people know they have STD or AIDS symptoms yet they continue to have sex with unsuspecting partners. Passing on AIDS should be treated as first degree murder."

The Ministry of Health issued a directive to all registered medical practitioners authorizing doctors to arrange for patient testing. A doctor in Bulawayo, a provincial capital, said many of his patients have been found to be infected but he could not disclose the figures.

Asked what procedures for testing are followed, he said, "We look for the major symptoms such as weight loss, chronic diarrhea lasting more than thirty days, prolonged fever and unusual opportunistic infection such as cryptococcal meningitis."

The patient is sent to the blood Transfusion Service for HIV testing.

"If the first test is positive, it doesn't necessarily mean the patient is infected. An HIV antibody test is conducted several times and if the result is positive and confirmed, it means definite infection," he said.

The doctor added that the infected person's name is then submitted to the HIV Advisory Committee, who would monitor the patient via reports filed by the doctor.

"The patient is then referred to the health department, where he is privately told that he has AIDS. The patient's partner is called in and both are told to keep the information private."

The doctor said the partner is also tested and in most cases, the results are positive. "The couple are then advised not to have casual sex and to keep to themselves only."

Since there is no treatment nor cure for AIDS, the doctor tells his patients to go about their daily work as though nothing has happened.

The frantic search for a cure led a traditional healer in Southern Zimbabwe to lay claim to the cure of two AIDS patients in Malawi.

According to *The Chronicle*, the healer said he was proud of his ability to cure the disease and had written to the local medical superintendent for patient referrals.

The healer uses three tree herbs from Malawi for his concoction. During the first week of treatment, the patient eats an herbal mush cooked with sap extracted from the bark of a certain tree. This is followed by one week of drinking milk mixed with sap from the bark of a second tree.

"I did not want to come forward with my cure but my ancestral spirits kept pestering me through dreams saying I should help save lives. My ancestors direct me to the appropriate medicine for this disease."

Before treating the two, the healer reportedly required both to obtain confirmation of their HIV infection from their physicians. This accomplished, the patients in question were successfully treated in Malawi during the first week of July, 1987. Neither patient is available for comment.

"AIDS could become a major epidemic in Africa if no immunization or treatment is forthcoming," Jonathan Mann, director of World Health Organization's special program on AIDS, reported.

Press reports from neighboring countries that one in five people in Central African cities has the AIDS virus are horrifying to the non-infected.

"All the economic, social, cultural and political consequences that could arise from such an epidemic, especially for the young and middle-aged, would be catastrophic to the social and economic development of Africa," he said.

At any rate, the impending AIDS epidemic is a global problem and the planet is responding. The World Health Organization has earmarked about US \$50 million to help countries fight AIDS. WHO Director-general, Dr. Hafdan Mahler, told newsmen upon arrival in Zimbabwe that in addition to this amount, WHO would mobilize between US \$50 million and US \$100 million every year to enable countries to sustain their AIDS campaigns. He contends the money will enable all African countries to start their own national strategies against AIDS.

Zimbabwe's AIDS campaign received US \$850,000 from the United States Agency for International Development to fund projects. The largest project is expansion of the serology laboratory at the blood Transfusion Service, which also received US \$10,000 from the American Ambassador's Self Help Fund for purchase of equipment from the United States and for locally manufactured refrigerators needed by blood centers around the country to store blood at optimal temperatures. Another project will fund printing of thousands of pamphlets in three languages for the Health Education Department.

Dr. Sydney Sekeramayi, the Minister of Health, called on all Ministry personnel to utilize funding in a wise and prudent manner in the hopes of preventing AIDS cases. At least seventy cases have been reported so far in Zimbabwe. An unidentified health official speculated on this figure since neighboring Zambia reports 395 AIDS cases.

AIDS IN AFRICA

And what is on the minds of women in this campaign for life? Mrs. Eunice Takawira, Health Education Officer, said fewer women than men responded by mail to the radio and television.

In a nation where contraception of any sort, including hysterectomy, must be by permission of the husband, women are exposed to AIDS unwillingly because they cannot tell their husbands to use condoms. It is a cultural given, women cannot tell their men to be monogamous. And women are angry.

"We are captive targets," Mrs. Takawira read from one letter. "Sex practices in this country will bury us if we don't change our ways."

A letter written by a woman and signed by several other women concluded, "With AIDS, we will finally be allowed to control our own bodies and decide for ourselves."

Concerning future projections, the AIDS campaign will continue until the Ministry of Health is satisfied with the community awareness level. The Ministry is not simply shoving information down the throats of Zimbabweans. Private companies, organizations and clubs constantly request doctors and AIDS experts as speakers and the inimitable AIDS pamphlets form the diligent Health Education Department. A Senior Health Education Officer ventured a general opinion that people are changing their sex practices in light of the impending AIDS epidemic.

As Americans living in the most technologically advanced society in the history of the planet, we stand to learn much from Zimbabwe's campaign and national fever to save their nation from becoming an empty landscape and devoid of human life.

Doris Wisher is a public health advisor living in Portland. Ms. Wisher spent the summer in Zimbabwe.

In all corners of Zimbabwe, AIDS posters can be seen strategically plastered on the walls of government buildings, clinics, movie theaters, churches, schools, police stations, bus stations, beer halls, on telephone poles and sign posts.