

Symposium report: HIV in communities, July 2014, AUT North Campus

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The NZ HIV Symposium was a one day event that brought together postgraduate students and HIV researchers from NZ universities to share their research. The theme for the Symposium was HIV in communities, the purpose of which was to acknowledge the diversity in HIV research and initiatives. This symposium was initiated by HIV researchers at AUT, University of Auckland and Massey University aiming to create a forum with a focus on postgraduate students sharing their research and an opportunity to build networks between HIV researchers. HIV/AIDS is one of the most important public health issues globally with UNAIDS currently reporting that there are 35.5 million people living with HIV. Since there is no cure, and treatment options are expensive and for life, HIV prevention initiatives are still the major means for controlling this disease.

The symposium was opened with a special address by Dr Rhoda Scherman, Head of Research at the AUT School of Public Health and Psychosocial Studies. Dr Scherman addressed the need for collaboration and networking among HIV researchers and supported our work as a part of global initiatives to find alternatives to halting the HIV epidemic. In the end of her address, Dr Scherman offered an opportunity to publish in "Walking the Talk", an annual publication of the School of Public Health and Psychosocial Studies.

Eleven presentations were given discussing a range of issues related to HIV. Topics included: stigma and discrimination among people living with HIV; youth sexual health; sexual education; male sexual health and HIV policy. The contexts of the presenters work were varied: that of India, Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Malaysia and Jamaica.

The limits to participation in prevention approaches for HIV key affected population (KAP), such as sex workers, men who have sex with men (MSM), was presented. HIV programmes were described as being mainly driven by decision makers with lack of commitment to create space for the community voices. A presentation on a pathway for increased community activism on HIV global programme action was proposed.

Additionally, stigma and discrimination associated with HIV in various countries was presented at the Symposium. Men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender groups are stigmatised and discriminated against due to their sexual identity as well as their HIV positive statuses. Perceived stigma associated with HIV and surrounding sexual orientation are identified as barriers to accessing healthcare services. Dealing with stigma and discrimination by people living with HIV was investigated in Nepal. This was achieved by rebuilding one's self-identity after HIV diagnosis through greater involvement with HIV related activities resulting in an increase in self-esteem, and feelings of societal respect and family reunion.

Another topic presented at the symposium was related to the sexual behaviour of blood donors and HIV prevention strategies toward intravenous drug users (IDU) in Malaysia. The research put emphasis on the need to ensure financial security, acknowledging adolescent sexually activity and an awareness of the risk of STIs preventable through the use of condoms. An HIV prevention study found that the attitudes and experiences of wives of IDUs included low condom use as this was viewed as being a barrier to intimacy.

A way forward

Following the symposium, there was a collective feeling of excitement regarding HIV research as well as connectedness amongst the audience. One presenter from Otago University stated: "I thought that I was the only PhD student doing HIV research in New Zealand. I was surprised to meet many other PhD students also involved in this research". As a way forward, the audiences agreed to conduct a similar event next year to be organised by Massey University.