

Press coverage of AIDS/HIV in the South Pacific: Short-term view of a long-term problem

ABSTRACT

In 1999, the author conducted face-to-face interviews with 25 newspaper editors from several South Pacific countries. The findings highlighted a worrying sense of complacency and lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS among the editors. Moreover, most of them were not convinced about the potential disastrous affect an HIV/AIDS epidemic would have on the political, social, economic and social landscape of their respective Pacific countries. The lack of editorials and front-page stories reinforced this view. New stories focused mainly on statistics and workshops. There was little mobilising information or human-interest angles which might have motivated self-protective behaviours or changed socio-political educational approaches. However, three years later, in September 2002, the author returned to the largest country in the Pacific, Papua New Guinea, and recorded a significant shift in attitude among the editors. What led to this 'change of heart' and will it result in a different approach to reporting HIV/AIDS?

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Introduction

THE ADAGE 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', is closely linked to press coverage of HIV/AIDS in the South Pacific region. Some countries like Vanuatu have just recorded their first official case while in other Pacific countries, the figures for HIV/AIDS are so low they hardly warrant a mention

(United Nations, 2002). So why all the fuss about HIV/AIDS? Other illnesses such as malaria, diabetes and heart disease are more widespread and of immediate concern to the lives of people in the Pacific region. Besides, political and economic survival far outweigh consideration of a disease that is removed and seemingly exaggerated in its importance.

Response from newspaper editors in the South Pacific.

This perspective on HIV/AIDS was common among many editors in the South Pacific region during the 1990s. This was revealed from findings during informal face-to-face interviews with 25 newspaper editors in seven Pacific countries or territories (Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tahiti and Tonga) from July 1998 to October 1999. Each editor was interviewed separately and asked 12 questions covering three main areas: personal knowledge of HIV/AIDS; the role of the press in regard to HIV/AIDS and obstacles to reporting the disease. Each interview was audiotaped and lasted at least one hour. Editors were chosen because they wield considerable influence in the selection or omission of news stories.

Findings from the interviews revealed that most editors remained unconvinced about the potential serious threat of HIV/AIDS. Nineteen of the editors considered malaria to be a greater threat than HIV/AIDS. (Cullen, 2000: 188). This was an amazing finding since malaria was not even present in some Pacific countries. Admittedly, most editors were referring to the South Pacific region rather than their own individual country.

For this reason the majority of editors were, for the most part, unwilling to lead public debate on HIV/AIDS for fear of exaggerating its presence and influence. This might explain the lack of front-page stories and editorial columns. None of the editors had an editorial policy on the disease, only two employed a health reporter and four had a health page. This was probably more indicative of the lack of 'newsworthiness' attributed to health issues in the South Pacific. Politics, business and sport remain the real 'hot' topics.

Only one editor, touched by others who were living with HIV/AIDS, thought differently and feared for the future. Some editors, however, interviewed by the author in 1999 and again in 2000 had, in the space of one year, shifted from a purely reactive approach — where waiting for information and stories became the norm — to a more pro-active stance with a strong determination to go out and get the story and preferably one with a human-interest angle.

Many editors readily admitted their ignorance and lack of thought on the topic. Only three editors said they were satisfied with their knowledge of HIV/AIDS. Every editor mentioned the lack of trained health reporters as a stumbling block for future coverage. Despite a general willingness to increase the educational content of news items, the editors, for the most part, remained unconvinced that an HIV/AIDS epidemic would eventuate because of the low number of cases. Many editors may have been influenced by what media researcher Mayer (1968) referred to as the 'quantitative view of importance'.

This lack of awareness and urgency among the majority of editors in the South Pacific region concerning the wider health, social and economic consequences of an HIV/AIDS epidemic sits in stark contrast to the views expressed in 1996, by former Fijian Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka who compared HIV/AIDS in the South Pacific to a dangerously powerful storm that was forming offshore. He made an urgent appeal for the media to protect people from its ferocity and harm by providing essential information and education about the disease.

HIV/AIDS in Papua New Guinea

The seriousness of this task was underlined in a statement by the former PNG Prime Minister, Sir Mekere Morauta. Speaking in Port Moresby at the launch of World AIDS Day on 1 December 2000, Sir Mekere described the HIV/AIDS situation in his country as a 'silent catastrophe'. The Prime Minister warned that between 15,000 and 22,000 individuals in PNG were probably infected. The current population is 5.2 million and official figures for HIV/AIDS indicate just under 5000 cases. (National AIDS Council, December 2001) Also, a report entitled, *Potential economic impact of an HIV/AIDS epidemic in PNG*, published by the Centre for International Economics in February 2002, paints a depressing future for PNG.

If Papua New Guinea follows the low scenario, the working age population will be 13 per cent smaller than it would otherwise have been by 2020. If PNG follows the medium pathway, the working age cohort will be smaller than 34 per cent. If it follows the big scenario, it will be smaller by almost 38 per cent... The current measured HIV/AIDS prevalence places PNG in either the low level or concentrated phase.

Clement Malau, former director of the National AIDS Council Secretariat in

Port Moresby, insists the massive epidemic of HIV/AIDS in many Sub-Saharan African countries, such as Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe — where HIV infection rates are as high as 25 per cent in each country — could be repeated in PNG.

Given the current situation in PNG, we could go the same way as many Sub-Saharan African countries; we've got a large sex industry and uncontrolled sexually transmitted infections; we've got a very young sexually active population and we've got to a certain extent denial in some provinces. So given that sort of setting, I think that it's not too much of an exaggerated statement to say that PNG could end up with extremely high infections rates as has happened in these Africa countries (Malau, 2001).

Describing the spread of HIV/AIDS in PNG, Peter Piot, executive head of the United Nations AIDS programme (UNAIDS), predicts a potentially devastating outcome for countries like PNG if decisive action is not taken to slow the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Although, it is difficult to predict precisely the future, the potential is definitely there and it will depend on how the country is going to respond to it that will determine the course of the epidemic (Piot, 2001).

Interviews with Papua New Guinean editors

Face to face formal interviews with ten current and former PNG editors in Port Moresby (September 2002) revealed a definite change in attitude towards reporting HIV/AIDS. During the interview each editor was handed a questionnaire with 18 questions. These covered four main areas: personal knowledge of HIV/AIDS; the role of the press in regard to reporting HIV/AIDS; available resources and obstacles to reporting HIV/AIDS. There were five possible responses to each question and editors could strongly agree, agree, remain neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree with each statement. For example, the first question asked: 'Are you satisfied with your knowledge of HIV/AIDS.' Four of the ten editors replied that they strongly agreed, four others remained neutral and two disagreed. The use of this type of questionnaire allowed the author to discover a more precise level of agreement or disagreement among the editors. A simple and straightforward 'yes' or 'no' does not adequately reveal the intensity of the response (Cullen, 2002a).

Findings from the questionnaire revealed that nine of the ten editors now view HIV/AIDS as the most serious disease in the country. Back in 1999, eight editors stated that malaria was the number one health issue. What prompted this change in perception? One reason, expressed by the editors, was their improved knowledge of the disease, achieved through increased cooperation with the National AIDS Council (NAC) and other NGOs. Another factor, according to the editors, was that they now know someone who is living with HIV/AIDS. Three years ago, only one editor in PNG admitted to knowing a person living with HIV/AIDS. These two developments have led to an increased openness about discussing the disease (Cullen 2002a).

Time will tell whether these changes translate into more informative and educational stories. A quantitative research of all news items on HIV/AIDS in PNG's two daily newspapers, *The National* and *Post-Courier* from 1987-1999 revealed that editorials and front-page stories on HIV/AIDS were rare (Cullen, 2000: 227- 234). However, due to the sensational nature of front-page stories, it may be advisable to keep news stories of the disease off the first page since this type of reporting, without any context, tends to exaggerate and distort the issue. Worse still, it promotes stigma and increases fear among the readers.

As happened in 1999, one editor in particular has taken an extremely keen interest in HIV/AIDS and this was reflected in the higher number of news items on HIV/AIDS in his newspaper. During my one-week stay in September 2002, I counted three new items and three news features on HIV/AIDS in his newspaper compared with only one in the other daily newspaper. Interestingly, this same newspaper is the only one in PNG that has a full-time health reporter. The others have journalists who report on health alongside other issues and events.

Putting a human face on the problem was, according to the majority of editors, the next important step. This, they argue, is difficult since there is so much stigma and fear attached to the disease. Frank Kolma, former editor of *The National*, remarked that if someone has HIV then 'it's as if his or her whole family is infected. This type of reaction makes it nearly impossible for anyone to come forward and say they are positive' (Kolma, 2002). Fear of contamination is widespread. Another editor cited the example of numerous unclaimed AIDS corpses lying in the morgue at Port Moresby General Hospital. It is hoped, however, that by encouraging people living with HIV/AIDS to share their story and experiences, an atmosphere of gradual acceptance will develop. In many Western countries, the stigma attached to the disease was significantly reduced

when the press reported on well-known personalities in the community such as sports stars or popular musicians who had declared their HIV status.

In October 2002, a workshop for journalists from 13 South Pacific countries on reporting reproductive health drew up a declaration that urged their editors to devise an editorial policy on HIV/AIDS and allow the use of human interest stories instead of an over-reliance on statistics from the Ministry of Health (Cullen 2002b). The journalists also stated in their declaration that the disease should be linked to an analysis of wider social issues such as sex education, unwanted teenage pregnancies, rape, domestic violence and gender equality. Examining underlying causes and consequences was considered as important as reporting official statements and documentation.

It is unhelpful to focus only on the latest figures for HIV/AIDS. Often they are incorrect and misleading. They provide a false sense of security and can promote complacency... Concentrate more on people living with the disease. Let them tell their story. This puts a human face on the story and has proved to be more effective in educating people (Suva, 2002).

Talking about sex or reporting someone living or dying of AIDS in the South Pacific are issues that editors said they preferred to avoid because Christian and traditional beliefs in the Pacific region influence public perception and understanding of HIV/AIDS. Seven out of ten PNG editors interviewed by the author in 2002 were hesitant to discuss this issue. This made it difficult to determine the extent of cultural influences upon editors in their approach to HIV/AIDS. However, newspaper editors in the French overseas territories of Tahiti and New Caledonia were not embarrassed to use phrases like 'condom' and 'sexual intercourse' in press reports on HIV/AIDS. This was not the case in countries like Samoa where it is virtually outlawed to use such terminology. After some initial hesitancy, there were less problems with the use of the word 'condom' in Papua New Guinea's daily newspapers. Yet, there has been a strong reaction to the use of the particular pidgin word 'koap' to express sexual intercourse. The National AIDS Council used the word during a recent media campaign to promote HIV/AIDS in the country. However, two newspapers in the country have refused to use the expression and instead use another word that expresses 'sleeping together'.

Possible solutions

While cultural taboos remain an obstacle to reporting HIV/AIDS, it is not impossible to overcome some of these barriers. The press is well-placed to influence public perception of a problem especially by removing the silence and stigma attached to the disease. For example, avoid headlines and news items that constantly describe HIV/AIDS as a killer disease with no cure. Inevitably, this creates a sense of hopelessness. Instead, include more positive news items about ways to prevent infection and feature stories on people living rather than dying with HIV/AIDS.

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 NGO or government press releases. In this way it is possible to challenge policy decision makers to act now before the HIV/AIDS tidal wave hits shore with its intense ferocity. For example, ask the Prime Minister and other politicians in their respective countries to comment on the issue. What are they doing about disease that has the potential to seriously damage (and maybe destroy) the social and economic growth of their country and constituencies? What financial and other resources will they make available? What about the accessibility of medicines? These are basic questions that need to be asked and answered.

Research on press coverage of HIV/AIDS in Papua New Guinea (Cullen, 2000) revealed that from 1996, the only full-time health reporter in Papua New Guinea who worked at *The National* and the only newspaper with a health page, *The Independent*, did make a difference in terms of the number of news items on health and in particular on HIV/AIDS. The lack of trained health reporters was consistently mentioned by the editors in the South Pacific as an obstacle to improving and extending coverage of HIV/AIDS. *The National* has re-introduced its health page in response to public interest on health issues. Apart from HIV/AIDS, there are several other diseases that people in the South Pacific need more important information about, including STDs, diabetes, malaria and heart disease.

A study of all news items on HIV/AIDS in PNG's two daily newspapers, *The National* and *Post-Courier*, from January 1998 to December 1999 revealed greater emphasis on the 'harmful effects' of contracting HIV/AIDS rather than information about avoiding 'risk behaviour'. This portrayed a sense of helplessness.

ness that there was nothing that could contain the spread of the disease. The inclusion of Mobilising Information (MI) — news items about how to avoid being infected by a contagious virus like HIV — adds a sense of balance by encouraging participation and hope. Although it is difficult to calculate the influence of MI on behavioural patterns, its omission removes vital information for challenging risk behaviours.

Anna Solomon, former editor and managing director of PNG's weekly newspaper, *The Independent*, argues that journalists have to work harder at presenting the disease in way that captures the attention of their readers. 'AIDS is seen as that boring old stuff. It needs to be packaged better' (Solomon 2002). Solomon urges journalists to link the story with wider social issues that are directly connected to HIV/AIDS such as rape, teenage pregnancies, domestic violence and gender equality. 'AIDS is not just about condoms. It has much wider ramifications' (Solomon 2002).

It could be argued that some editors are suffering from 'AIDS awareness fatigue'. For example, in the build-up to World AIDS Day on 1 December 2002, one newspaper in PNG did not even mention the disease or the globally celebrated event while the two daily newspapers decided to delay coverage and keep it to a minimum. Admittedly, there were other competing stories that week and these were deemed more compelling and interesting. But that's exactly Solomon's point (2002). How do you report a disease that could, according to the latest UN figures, wipe out a significant portion of the population (United Nations 2002) and yet make it newsworthy with a content that alerts rather than alarms people? Indeed, this is an extremely difficult challenge especially when current figures for HIV/AIDS are still low in PNG and other diseases such as malaria account for more deaths.

Conclusion

Everyone in society needs to play his or her part in tackling the emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic in the South Pacific region. It is a multi-sectoral task. However, 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 and these stories are frequently spotted and used by radio and television news editors. Moreover, they can help challenge public opinion on HIV/AIDS that is often based on ignorance, fear and prejudice. Due to its long shelf-life and the 'gloom and doom' factor 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.

While a number of editors in PNG and the South Pacific should be highly commended for the way they have responded to the threat of HIV in their countries, the time has come to step up coverage and allocate more space for information about prevention and to embarrass government officials into greater action. Let us not forget the rally call by the former Fijian Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka in a statement on the spread of HIV/AIDS in the South Pacific region. Sadly, it sounds increasingly more prophetic in 2003 and beyond.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Pacific is a clear enough signal that there is a storm gathering force; a storm that can become a devastating hurricane such as we have never seen before and a storm which, if we do not take the necessary precautions, we will not live through or regret or live to regret forever (Rabuka, 1996).

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