

# Reporting diseases in the Pacific

Heart disease, tuberculosis, STDs and HIV/AIDS have one common feature: they are, with the correct information and application, all preventable diseases. Yet, throughout the Pacific, such diseases are on the increase. What should the media do?

By **TREVOR CULLEN**

HEART DISEASE, tuberculosis, STDs and HIV/AIDS have one common feature: they are, with the correct information and application, all preventable diseases. Yet, throughout the Pacific, such diseases are on the increase. What can the media (press, radio and television) do to help stem the rising tide of ill-health that creates continuing social and economic hardship?

## **Role of the media**

Basically, the media have a threefold aim: to provide information, education and entertainment. While some in the media have opted purely for the latter component, most editors and journalists are committed to informing their audiences about events that affect them. Generally, however, news stories concentrate on politics, sports and business while health is regarded as less appealing. This may explain why the health page has disappeared from many newspapers throughout the Pacific.

Yet health is an issue that affects the daily lives of all Pacific islanders and reporting diseases, while less 'hot' and 'catchy', demands both information and education. While it is vital for the public to know the extent of a health problem through reports on workshops and the latest statistics, there is an additional need: to provide ways, methods, practices that help combat preventable diseases. Without these two aspects (facts and remedies), news reports create a

## TREVOR CULLEN

sense of helplessness and worse still, complacency.

Media reporting of diseases throughout the Pacific tend to focus purely on the extent of the problem and avoid the important issue of prevention. One example of this can be seen in the coverage of HIV/AIDS in Papua New Guinea's two daily newspapers, *The National* and *Post Courier* during the first six months of 1999. While both newspapers deserve praise for their undoubted commitment in covering this difficult subject, there is still an over-concentration on facts and workshops with little in the way of human interest, people living with HIV/AIDS or ways to combat the disease.

### Daily newspaper health coverage in Papua New Guinea

#### Post Courier and The National January - June 1999

Headings	Percentage
Figures	36%
Workshops	27%
Harms	26%
MI	1%
Cures	4%
PWA	4%
Human Interest	4%
Number of articles	81
<i>Post-Courier</i>	30
<i>The National</i>	51

The chart shows that while 81 articles appeared from January to June 1999 only four per cent of stories included people living with HIV/AIDS and only one per cent carried information on how to combat the disease which is referred to as mobilising information (MI). News stories on workshops and the latest statistics, while important, received a disproportionate coverage (63 per cent).

#### 'Mobilising information' (MI)

This is where the idea of 'Mobilising Information' can assist both the media and the public. The concept, put forward by media researchers Kristiansen and Harding (1984) and Singer and Endreny (1987), criticised the media for concentrating only on the 'harms' (figures and facts) of a disease while omitting a description of the 'risk' factors and ways to prevent infection.

So with HIV/AIDS, telling people about the impending epidemic, alerts them to the serious health problem; spelling out explicitly and precisely the risks and ways to prevent HIV infection, can mobilise a more active response. The use of MI applies to coverage of other common diseases in the Pacific such as heart disease, diabetes and STDs. Avoiding the use of MI in reporting diseases creates the possibility that readers will perceive a disease such as HIV/AIDS as a purely theoretical threat which does not involve them instead of an immediate and serious public health threat to everyone.

The omission of MI in relation to coverage of HIV/AIDS is also like telling people only about the calm before a violent storm instead of informing them that the storm has already come ashore and without proper precautions, the effects will be devastating. While diseases such as malaria and malnutrition are of more immediate concern, HIV/AIDS has long-lasting health, social, economic and developmental implications.

The seriousness of a disease like HIV/AIDS in the Pacific was spelled out by the executive head of the United Nations agency on HIV/AIDS, Dr Peter Piot, at the 5th International Congress on HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific in Kuala Lumpur from 23-27 October 1999. He said that a country like Papua New Guinea had all the ingredients for an epidemic on the scale of what happened in many sub-Saharan African countries. Currently, African countries such as Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe have HIV/AIDS infections rates that affect 20 per cent of their respective populations.

This scenario demands a decisive response. Dr Piot remarked:

The HIV/AIDS epidemic across the region is still largely ahead of us. Moreover, I hope that none of us assumes that just because a country has low rates today, those rates cannot change with frightening speed. Given what we know about the epidemic, such naivete is unforgivably short-sighted.

The time has come for the media in the Pacific to stop playing its squeaky tin whistle and start blowing a large and continuous trumpet blast. The HIV virus has come ashore and people need to be told clearly and consistently about how to protect themselves. Likewise, political leaders at regional and local level, together with church leaders and other agenda setters, should adopt a similar approach. While HIV/AIDS is the concern of everyone, the media are well placed and very influential in shaping public perception of the problem.

## TREVOR CULLEN

Studies on the use of MI in the media have shown positive results. The most recent example was seen in Uganda where there has been a 28 per cent decrease in HIV infections among urban youth in Kampala. (UNAIDS, 1999).

### Recommendations

In the Pacific region, there are cultural and commercial barriers to adopting MI as part of news reporting on diseases in the region. MI, however, offers an approach that potentially promotes a positive rather than merely passive response. Is it enough to inform the public about an impending disaster without including information about protection, prevention and ultimately survival? Surely, when reporting diseases, information and education are different sides of the same coin.

The removal of the health page from many Pacific newspapers and the lack of trained health reporters are major setbacks to improving the reporting of medical issues and diseases throughout the Pacific. Both these problems need to be addressed. One small offer of help has come from the Journalism Department at Queensland University which starts in February 2000 a one year full-time (or two years part-time) postgraduate diploma in medical journalism.

□ *Fr Trevor Cullen is currently working on a PhD research degree at Queensland University on "Press coverage of HIV/AIDS in the Pacific". This is the shortened version of a paper presented by him at the 1999 Pacific Islands News Association conference in Suva, Fiji. Email: tacullen@ozemail.com.au*