



Reporting guide for a crisis

HIV/AIDS Media Guide and Research Report on the Media's Reporting of HIV/AIDS, by Ruth Polland and Emma Walters. Brussels: International Federation of Journalists, 2006. 27 pp. www.ifj-asia.org

THE figures are difficult to grasp: 65 million have been infected with HIV and 25 million people have died since the disease was first detected in 1981. Currently, 38 million people are infected with the virus and this figure could double by 2020.

Closer to home, the National AIDS Council in Papua New Guinea (PNG) announced in May 2006 that there were at least 100,000 cases within the country and that PNG could

experience a similar AIDS epidemic that has devastated several Southern African countries where infections rates account for more than 25 percent of some populations.

While the media have a significant role to play by informing the public and holding governments to account, a more immediate problem is how can journalists report effectively on a disease that has been around for more than 20 years, as is the case in PNG.

In light of this, the *HIV/AIDS Media Guide* is indeed a timely publication as it aims to improve the reporting of HIV worldwide.

The booklet, published by the International Federation of journalists (IFJ) and sponsored by the Swedish Trade Union movement, is divided into three parts: the basics, the media and more about HIV. It provides answers to frequently asked questions and presents explanations on transmission, treatments, opportunistic infections and alternative terms to use so as to avoid promoting misconceptions about people living with HIV and AIDS.

These sections are extremely useful, especially for their clarity and precision.

The section on research focused on six countries across Africa and Asia. The countries were: the

Philippines, India, Cambodia in Asia and Zambia, South Africa and Nigeria in Africa. The Media Guide is available in the languages of these countries: English, French, Tamil, Tagalog and Khmer. Media monitoring was conducted for two weeks (one week in Asia and the other in Africa) in late November and early December 2005 in order to determine the quality and quantity of HIV reports in the media.

Overall, the survey revealed an improvement in media coverage of the disease with more stories in print (281) than in the broadcast media (75). And there was a strong call to use new angles when reporting the story.

One weakness, however, was the limited scope of the research—one week in each continent, which also coincided with World AIDS on December 1, a date when there are always more HIV/AIDS stories. Different results may have been obtained if the research was conducted elsewhere in the year. But the media guide does provide a snapshot of what is happening in the six countries that were surveyed.

Overall, I would highly recommend this booklet because HIV is more than a disease that infects an individual. It is a social and economic crisis that needs informed and

accurate reporting. The booklet provides essential facts and writing tips to make this happen.—*DR TREVOR CULLEN, journalism coordinator of Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.*