

A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF MASS COMMUNICATION IN PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF AIDS IN COIMBATORE DISTRICT

N. Meena Kumari*

Introduction

One of the major achievements of modern medicine has been the conquest of most of communicable diseases. These diseases were major causes of mortality and morbidity in earlier decades of twentieth century. With the development of effective vaccines and modern antibiotics, the threat of communicable diseases was largely contained.

In the early eighties, when the first few cases of AIDS were reported, few might have realized its propensity to become a global public health problem. In a span of two decades, since its first identification, HIV infection has become a pandemic and has posed a formidable challenge to mankind, in almost all aspects of life. Acquired immune - deficiency syndrome came to be known in India in 1986, and from available data it is clear that it is sweeping the whole country, The report from NACO published in 1999 showed that there were approximately 87,313 HIV positive cases in India and no part of our country are free of HIV infection. These figures grossly underestimate the situation due to underreporting and inconsistent sera-surveillance in different states in our country The alarming rate of its spread, the magnitude of its infection, inordinately long incubation period and resultant propensity of spread, lack of curative therapy and vaccine to prevent it mandates the acquisition of complete knowledge about HIV disease. This acquisition of knowledge is not only required for medical and paramedical personnel, but also to some extent, to majority of population, particularly high risk one.

* Centre for Women's Studies, Avinashilingam University For Women,
Coimbatore- 641043.

In present circumstances, AIDS prevention largely depends on health education and behavioral changes based on AIDS awareness, particularly among young adults who are prone to risky behavior. Communication and development are the major domains of human endeavor which are intimately linked with each other. The process of development calls for a strategy of communication which is aimed at altering the targeted persons from mere recipients of information to seekers of information. The main function or purpose of communication is to change or guide other people's behavior.

Why AIDS?

Developing countries the world over are facing several deadly diseases, chief among them is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS. One of the biggest public health and developmental problems of this century, which started from mere smoke signals and swept across the globe like wildfire. AIDS is now the fourth leading cause of death globally (Newsweek, June 11, 2006). It is important to recognize that AIDS is not just a health problem. It has major social and economic consequences

In most instances females and rural residents were more disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in the cities. However, lack of awareness about AIDS only goes to prove that Indians are still in the denial stage of the syndrome, while the truth is that India has more than 20 million HIV infected people, the largest number in any country. It appears that India is sitting on a time bomb which has already begun exploding.

Use of Mass Media in AIDS Awareness

The mass media represents the most readily available and potentially most economical means of imparting information about HIV/AIDS. Along with other forms of communication the mass media can effectively raise public awareness and concern about HIV/AIDS. Communication experts have called for the mass education of the general public, and argued that this large scale education has the

potential for not only correcting misinformation, but also for creating and maintaining a more favorable environment for AIDS.

Strategies have to be devised by which public is made aware and not alarmed. What is needed, therefore, is not just planned campaigns, as opposed to regular media programming, but well planned campaigns which utilize the full potential of mass media and entertainment. Research has established that mass media are most likely to change behavior when the information is targeted at specific audiences, comes from a credible source, provides a personally relevant and engaging message. Effective use of mass media requires careful planning, audience research, message development, pre testing, dissemination strategy, evaluation, coordination with existing services, and linking mass media with interpersonal communication. So far, the media in India have treated AIDS more as news than as a growing menace and scourge threatening both human lives and dignity.

Adolescence: Period of High Information Needs

As early as in 1992, it was estimated that about 20 - 25% of all the HIV infections occur among young persons. Recent studies have shown that maximum people with AIDS are young adults who are in the most productive age group. This would imply that they have acquired the disease in their teenage years considering the time span of about 10 years required for the AIDS related complexes to turn into full blown disease. The infection rates in young people appear to be increasing every where.

Further, in many countries it is likely that the rates will increase faster amongst girls than the boys because of cultural and social norms which subject girls to sexual experience at an earlier age. Adolescence is a crucial time of life, not only for health education and health promotion in general but also for HIV prevention and AIDS education specifically. AIDS affects in terms of social and psychological development, the most vital segment of the population, the young adults. This study therefore concentrates on the target group of adolescents between the ages 13 years and 17 years.

Research Design

A sample of 200 respondents was selected by adopting multi stage sampling method. Taking a sample of 5 newspapers, the AIDS messages appearing in them were studied during the years 2000 -2006. Similarly a study of audio visual media was conducted through observation method. The AIDS messages broadcast or telecast by the electronic media during the same time period have been observed. This aspect of the study gave the researcher an insight into the involvement of the media with the AIDS issue.

A survey was also conducted amongst the school going adolescents in Coimbatore District. This method was utilized to assess the extent of AIDS awareness in the target population and what role the mass media had played in enhancing this awareness.

Findings or the Study

The maximum number of articles appeared in the Hindu followed by the Indian Express and the Hindustan Times. The articles were mostly news reports and news analysis in the form of editorials. The Hindu published more analysis and discussions. The Times of India published the only article related to the economic aspect of AIDS. Maximum number of public health messages appeared in the Indian Express, some of them covered the entire page of the newspaper. Maximum number of human interest stories appeared in Dinamani, Tamil Daily. During the period Nov. - Dec, 2006 the maximum number of articles appeared in The Hindu. This newspaper has given serious thought to the issue and a number of thought provoking articles on various aspects of the disease have appeared. In the final analysis, the Times of India was found to be the 'only newspaper which covered a range of subjects on AIDS. It has shown a consistent concern for the issue as it has maintained an interest in the subject during all the three years.

This study provides an analysis of AIDS related news material which appear in the 5 prominent newspapers of Coimbatore. District Further it provides an analysis of audio visual messages that have been presented to the audiences since

the last decade. It was found that the society as well as the media has yet to accept that AIDS is an issue of each person's concern. Moralistic stands, denial, prejudice, lack of research and follow up has been seen in the news reports. Some of the reports do reel out baffling statistics of people who have been infected by HIV, but on the whole AIDS is still a disease which happens to other people.

The impact of media coverage of any subject depends on the interaction of several factors, including the previous knowledge of the readers or the audiences, the content of the message, the credibility or otherwise of the journalist, the reaction of the people with whom the reader or viewer goes on to discuss what they believe they have read, seen or heard. The aims of the mass media should be to set the agenda for the development of public policy and influence the actions of those who have the power in our society. In approaching the role of mass media in relation to AIDS, the media need an idea, of where the public interest lies, of how the public policy should evolve. Such an idea must clearly be founded on the best available medical knowledge and on social research. The main aim behind this survey was to find out the mass media access and reach status and the AIDS awareness level of adolescents from two different settings.

The respondents came from four different schools from two different Towns. Both girls and boys were administered the questionnaires. The total Sample population of students was 200 were analyzed. Most of them had educated parents. The most common qualification for fathers was found to be a professional degree (33.3%) and the mothers in most cases were graduates (33.4%). The majority of students were from nuclear families (79.2%) with average income of the majority being Rs. 5001 to RS.10,000 (37.4%).

More number of fathers were in government service as compared to any other category (65.4%). The reason could be that two schools out of four were government schools. Most of the mothers were housewives (81.3%) and some of them were school teachers.

The media access study was interesting as the data showed that more students own Television sets (97.2%) than those that subscribe to any newspaper (82.9%) The media exposure findings reveal that maximum number of students is exposed to the television and only half the number read their newspaper daily. (98.8% watch television and only 40% read the paper everyday) Even when studied independently it was found that amongst the government schools, 99% students in the Municipal town and 98.3% students in the Taluk town watched television regularly whereas 43% in the metropolis and 38% of the government school in the Taluk town read daily newspapers. From amongst the public school students 48% in the Municipal and 46% in the satellite town read the newspaper everyday.

It was found that the AIDS awareness profile of the Municipal Towns students (69.5%) was better than the town students (53.25%). The girls in the Municipal Town scored the best with 75.9%. The Municipal town boys stood next with 63.6%. The town girls had a higher figure (59.8%) as compared to the Municipal town boys (46.7%). This clearly shows that municipal town students are better aware than the satellite town students although both of them exhibit similar media profile. The girls in the Municipal town have scored the best and even the girls in the Taluk town have scored better than their male counterparts proving better health consciousness amongst the girls

The Matriculation school boys had the best awareness score with 66.9% and the Matriculation school girls stood next with 63.44%. The government school boys scored 57.8% and girls 54.98%. This goes to prove that boys and girls in Matriculation schools are certainly better informed than the boys and girls in the government schools.

In the age wise analysis of AIDS awareness scores one finds that maximum awareness is with the maximum age. Students who were 13 years had an awareness score of 57.27% amongst boys and 48.1 % amongst girls. Among 14 year olds, the boys have 58.68 % and girls 57.2% Among the 15 year olds boys scored 67.26% and girls scored 66.1 %. If one observes closely one finds that the girls although, initially, rather unaware, slowly catch up with the boys as they grow older.

Amongst the 16 year olds boys scored 72.47 % and girls 69.7%. The 17 year boys are left behind with 77.31% score by the 17 year old girls who scored 78.2%.

Co-relational analysis between variables was conducted to find out the relationships between, AIDS awareness scores, socio economic status and mass media reach and access among the target population.

This study find that the mass media reach and exposure is not affected by the age and sex of the respondent. There is no relationship between first source of information and subsequent AIDS awareness. Since in this case the first source of information happens to be television in maximum number of cases, this finding only points out towards the short term effect of the medium. This would also mean that television cannot lead to sustained behavior change or even to behavior modification. However, a definite relationship has been found between recall of message on radio and television and the AIDS awareness profile. This clearly shows that consistent messages by the mass media do have some retention in the minds of the audiences. Since our target group is of a very impressionable age messages have a high retention value and they do add to the overall increase in knowledge.

The media profile also revealed certain interesting factors - newspaper readership is very low while television viewer ship is reasonably high. This is a startling finding as all the students come from educated families. The respect that the daily newspaper commands in urban homes across the country seems threatened with this behavior of future citizens. With the inclusion of children section in the newspapers, perhaps there must have been some improvement in the readership percentage, but the point to worry about is that the sample population is not children population. These are young people who should be reading the regular newspaper. If the status quo is maintained, newspapers will have to work harder to cultivate a generation of readers who are as loyal to the medium as their grandfathers had been another medium that seems to be losing ground is the radio. Television with its visuals can provide a clear picture and hence an effective message. Moreover with its extensive reach in this particular group it can spread the message really far.

Cinema although popular as a medium has not contributed to AIDS awareness at all.

Media profile of a group as such was quite high and this implies that there is a lot of scope for mass media to use its potential with the target group. Definite relationships have been found between the media profile and socio economic status and AIDS awareness profile and the city of residence. Keeping in mind these findings messages can be designed for different locations and for various classes of audience. Television messages hold special significance as they have shown highest recall in this study with the best received messages being the celebrity endorsements.

The obvious finding here is that the Municipal students have better AIDS awareness profile. Since most interpersonal programmes are carried out in these cities, students hear a lot about AIDS from sundry other sources and not just from television. More discussions in schools, well publicized health meals, international conferences, more hoardings on the main roads, transit messages, messages on bus stops, all this has had an impact on the group, whereas the students in the Taluk town are deprived of this type of message onslaught.

Whatever they have imbibed from various media does not seem enough to give them a clear picture of the situation. While 97.7% students in the and 84.5% students in the Taluk town have heard about AIDS, the Municipal and 76.9% in the Taluk town seemed to have heard any health related message. It is rather puzzling to see that our youngsters do not consider AIDS a health problem.

Students belonging to public schools and higher socio economic strata with educated parents have a better AIDS awareness profile. AIDS, however does not discriminate. HIV can infect anybody and the uninformed are more susceptible. These findings reiterate the need for the messages to be taken to smaller towns, among the lower economic groups and among the uneducated

The sample respondents reveal that they want to get more AIDS related information from medical professionals. The girls as they grow show better

awareness levels, so much so that they surpass the boys in awareness. This fact has been proved in Sivagangai District Town as well as Tiruppattur, a Taluk Town.

The young boys, who are going to grow up to be husbands and fathers, need to be shown a direction which they can follow. Young people are gregarious by nature; the need of the hour is to canalize their energies towards the direction of safe sex and no use of drugs. The students have exhibited a desire to attend seminars, workshops or lectures regarding AIDS . This is a group that is keen to get information. They have been oscillating between peer and porn to get their sex education. The time is ripe to target this group.

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