

Press coverage of HIV/AIDS in PNG: Is it sufficient to report only the news?

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Promoting prevention is seen by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a key approach in attempts to limit the rapid spread of HIV throughout Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Pacific region. Research findings, however, in 1999, 2002 and 2005 show that the press in PNG prefers to quote official figures (regardless of accuracy) rather than include urgently needed educational messages about transmission and protection. Considering that a WHO representative in PNG said in 2004 that HIV infections could reach one million in the next 10-15 years, it is appropriate to ask whether the press in PNG (and in other parts of the world) has a responsibility to educate the public as opposed to focusing only on reporting the news in times of a public health crisis? This paper aims to understand the extent and seriousness of the epidemic in PNG and to seek answers to questions such as: has reporting of the disease in the PNG press increased or decreased since the last study in 2000; have the news topics changed; and how do news stories strive to educate readers about the disease? The term “HIV/AIDS” is used to include the two different stages of infection – people living with the HIV and those with AIDS.

Introduction: HIV/AIDS in PNG

The time for doubt is over. Australia’s nearest neighbour, PNG, is now on the verge of a serious public health epidemic. Dr Yves Renault, the World Health Organisation (WHO) representative in PNG, estimates that HIV infections in PNG could pass one-million by 2014: “WHO estimates that two per cent of PNG’s population is already HIV positive...which means we have 100,000 people living with HIV” (Renault 2004). He adds that, given the current level of infection and the rapid rate of increase, “It is possible that the number of infections could reach one million in 10-15 years unless decisive action is taken” (Renault 2004). Having spent 16 years as a WHO representative in Sub-Saharan Africa, Renault (2004) said that HIV infections among patients at Port Moresby General Hospital (PNGH) had reached nearly 20 per

cent and that the country was likely to experience an African-style epidemic. Renault's remarks are supported by David Gordon-Macleod, the British High Commissioner to PNG, who links what is happening in PNG to the HIV epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa, where in some countries, up to one-quarter of the population is living with the virus.

I have a sense that this country is more predisposed to what has already happened in southern Africa. The reasons include lack of development, tribalism and cultural diversity, the country's difficult geography, the culture of violence towards women, the promiscuity, the lack of medical doctors and the dependency on AIDS funding from outside (*Post-Courier*, 16 January 2005).

The High Commissioner explained that current figures for HIV/AIDS in the country were misleading: "These are clearly minimal statistics and we're probably talking about several times the actual truth in reality" (*Post-Courier*, 16 January 2005).

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. So there's need for a more aggressive lead from government to fight this disease. Innovative long-term strategies must be found and implemented (Malau 2004). And speaking to a group of Papua New Guinean parliamentarians in the country's capital, Port Moresby, in mid-February 2005, Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of the United Nations Program to combat the spread of HIV (UNAIDS), endorsed Malau's plea for strong and committed leadership:

There should be a united front that cuts across all boundaries in the fight against the AIDS epidemic as it is about the survival of your nation...And the choice for you is also clear to me. You have an emerging epidemic and it is either you act now and stop the epidemic in its infancy, or pay a very high price much later (Piot 2005).

Piot's remarks re-echo an earlier statement he made on HIV/AIDS in PNG in 2004:

The history of the AIDS epidemic has taught us that once things start moving, it's like a snowball and it's going to get worse and worse... PNG needs a very vigorous response otherwise it will go the African way. And PNG has everything that's wrong – lots of migration within the country, family disruption within the towns and villages, a lot of sexually transmitted diseases and a sexual culture that makes HIV spread very rapidly (Piot 2004).

The final remark of this section is left to the Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Health Minister, Melchior Pep. Interviewed in July 2004, he said his country anticipated a massive rise in the number of HIV infections: "We're sitting under a devastating time bomb that is exploding as we speak" (Pep 2004). This remark, together with the other statements by international health officials, clearly demonstrate that PNG is facing a rapidly expanding public health crisis which challenges not only politicians but also business, religious, medical, media, legal, civil leaders and non-government organisations(NGOs) to find an appropriate response. While certain individuals and organisations have spoken persistently about the dangers of the epidemic and called for an urgent and consistent response, it is commonly acknowledged within PNG that there is also a need for a larger multi-pronged approach that involves all sectors of society. Otherwise, the economic and social impact of the epidemic will have serious and long-lasting implications for PNG and Australia.

The impact of HIV/AIDS in PNG

The effect of massive infection rates will have disastrous economic consequences. A report in 2002, entitled, *Potential economic impact of an HIV/AIDS epidemic in Papua New Guinea*, published by the Centre for International Economics, paints a depressing future for PNG. The study describes three possible levels of an HIV/AIDS epidemic – low, middle and high - and estimates that by 2020, PNG's labour force would be between 13 and 38 per cent smaller than projected without HIV:

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...(AusAid 2002: 8-9).

Another report was published at the end of 2004 by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Entitled, *Papua New Guinea: The Road Ahead*, it reinforces the bleak outline of the 2002 report and analyses future economic and investment opportunities within the country. The section on demographic trends shows that PNG's population has almost doubled in size from 2.9 million at independence in 1975, to 5.5 million in 2004, growing at an average rate of 2.5 per cent every year. Forty one per cent of the population is under the age of 15. On the same page, the latest figures for HIV infections in PNG are reported and analysed. Again, there are three sets of figures for HIV infections in PNG, depending on whether the epidemic turns out to be on a low, medium or a high infection level. Therefore, the figures range from 0.9 per cent of the population (25,000) to a medium range of 1.7 per cent (45,000) to a worst-case scenario of 2.5% (69,000). Whatever figures are adopted, PNG still remains the country with the highest number of HIV cases in the Pacific - higher than the combined infection rates of all the other Pacific countries.

The 2004 report stresses that HIV surveillance in the country is poor and HIV infection rates across PNG are almost certainly grossly under-estimated. There is broad agreement that the incidences of HIV and AIDS in PNG have risen dramatically and, on its current course, the epidemic will have a devastating economic impact on households, firms and the government. The authors of the report point to a possible collapse of the health system through massive increased demand on health sector resources. It describes the country's health system as chronically under-resourced and struggling to provide services at all levels. It is not equipped to deal with an HIV/AIDS epidemic. Lack of financial support is another hindrance. In 2003 and 2004 the direct contribution from the PNG government for HIV amounted to only K700, 000 (350,000AUD). While the amount allocated for HIV/AIDS in 2005 is substantially higher, the government and ultimately the people may pay a high price for the serious lack of financial support in earlier years. These statements challenge the media to find an appropriate response to this impending public health epidemic. The next section focuses on the response of the press in PNG to this situation.

Press coverage of HIV in early 2005.

Research into press coverage of HIV/AIDS in PNG in 1999 and in 2002 revealed that, while editors and journalists did cover the story, they preferred to report official figures for HIV together with news items on workshops, budgets and overseas monetary donations rather than include educational messages about HIV and prevention (Cullen 2000 and 2003). This section deals with the current response of the press and, in particular, whether reporting of the disease in the PNG press increased or decreased since the last study by Cullen (2003). It also deals with whether certain types of news stories – HIV figures, workshops, budgets, donations – continued to be the major news topics or has the list of topics widened to include news items on prevention and people living with HIV? It should be noted at this stage that former and current newspaper editors in PNG should be highly commended for the way they have faced the challenge of HIV in their country and for their attempts to report the disease during the past decade.

In health research, the methodology used to document media representations of disease has generally adopted a quantitative approach. This study, however, opts for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of all HIV/AIDS stories in PNG's two daily newspapers, the *National* and the *Post-Courier* in early 2005. Data collection included all news items on HIV/AIDS from the middle of each month over a three-month period: 10-14 January; 14-18 February and 14-18 March. The websites of both newspapers were used to collect data for the research and it was considered important to select a particular week in consecutive months so as to achieve some form of comparative study. Because it was difficult to retrieve online archival material, the author downloaded the stories on the actual day that they appeared online. Content analysis involved identifying each newspaper cutting on HIV/AIDS as an editorial, a letter, a local story, a foreign story, a front-page story or a feature. "Foreign story" refers to news items about HIV/AIDS in foreign countries while "local story" refers to news items on HIV/AIDS within PNG. These categories followed closely those chosen by Kasoma (1990 and 1995) and Pitt and Jackson (1993) when these researchers analysed press coverage of HIV/AIDS in Zambia and Zimbabwe. By dividing HIV/AIDS news items into these six variables, the author wanted to determine, to some extent, especially in the case of

front-page stories and editorials, the views of the newspaper towards the disease.

PNG has only two daily newspapers and they provided the data for this study. The first, the *Post-Courier*, started in 1969 and is currently the largest-selling South Pacific daily with a circulation of 27,000 (ABC, December 2004). Murdoch's News Limited holds 62.5 per cent of the shares while private shareholders account for 27.5 per cent. The second newspaper, the *National*, began operating in late 1993. It has a circulation of 23,000 and is owned by a Malaysian firm, Monarch Investments, a subsidiary of timber company Rimbunan Hijau (Robie 2005: 57).

Analysis of PNG's two daily newspapers

Week 1: The *Post-Courier* reported eight HIV/AIDS news items compared to two in the *National*. While the *National* covered two local stories on workshops in Port Moresby, the *Post-Courier* carried four local stories that focused on workshops, provincial budgets and a donation from China. Reporting local stories and frequently restricting press coverage to workshops and overseas donations, corresponds to previous findings by Cullen in 2000. The other three stories in the *Post-Courier* were short news items placed under International briefs. While there is no weekend newspaper paper in PNG, the *Post-Courier* and the *National* carry a weekend pull-out section in their Friday editions. However, there were no in-depth feature stories in either edition and no feature stories, editorials or letters to the editor about the disease in the Monday-Friday editions.

Brian Gomez, executive editor-in-chief of *The National* - the second largest selling daily newspaper in PNG - admits that he waits until official statements and figures are released and is not concerned that the *National* is still without an editorial policy on AIDS: "We print whatever we feel is news and we take stats (on AIDS) with a grain of salt ... Yes, the figures are scary but the real figures aren't really known. So we stick with the official figures from the Ministry of Health" (Gomez 2005). When questioned about the discrepancies between official figures and those from NGOs that point to a potential sub-Saharan African type epidemic, Gomez (2000) replies that it is

hard to believe and quickly mentions that, as far as he is concerned, none of the 200 workers at his newspaper is HIV positive. He adds: “We can be advocates for good living but not a particular cause”.

Previous research on press coverage of HIV in PNG revealed that the *National* covered more local stories on HIV (Cullen 2000: 177). This might be explained by the fact that the newspaper employed a full-time health reporter and had started a health page (Cullen, 2000: 234). Also, the editor in the 1990s, Frank Kolma, was keen to cover the story because of his knowledge of others who were living with the disease. Interestingly, Bob Howarth, editor-in-chief at the *Post-Courier* from 2002-2004, was equally enthusiastic to inform readers about the disease. This might explain the noticeable increase in the *Post-Courier's* coverage of HIV/AIDS since 2002. This point – that an editor's interest can influence the amount and type of reporting on HIV - has been discussed before when Beharrell (1993) researched press coverage of AIDS in the British press and Cullen (2003) analysed press coverage of the disease in PNG and the South Pacific.

Week 2: A month later, from 10-14 February, the author carried out the same study of news items on HIV in the same newspapers. Again the findings, while not conclusive, did point to some interesting comparisons. This time, the *National* led the way with highest number of stories – eight in all – compared with two in the *Post-Courier*. This was virtually the reverse of what happened in the previous month. All the stories on HIV were local in content and *The National* carried a front-page story, an editorial and even a photograph of some young people living with HIV. They were standing alongside their carers during a march through the capital, Port Moresby, so as to promote greater awareness of the disease. To emphasize the sensitivity of the issue, the *National* printed a clarification the next day at the bottom of page one, stressing the photograph showed both HIV/AIDS sufferers and carers standing together. It seems readers could not tell who exactly was living with the virus. This is a new and positive development – putting human faces to the disease.

Research on press coverage of HIV/AIDS in the PNG during the 1990s showed that the disease received substantial

press coverage in the *Post-Courier* and the *National* when compared with other illnesses such as malaria and heart disease (Cullen 2000: 228). Yet, only a few news items referred to people living with the disease or who had died of complications from it. This, together with the failure to put a human face on the problem, framed HIV/AIDS as more of a distant theoretical disease rather than an immediate and serious health threat. This finding matched Kasoma's (1990 and 1995) research on press coverage of HIV/AIDS in Zambia and Pitts and Jackson's (1993) research on the same topic in the Zimbabwean press. Failure to mention the cause of death may be connected to strong cultural influences within Zambia, Zimbabwe and PNG that prevent a description of the cause of death. Also, no one dies from HIV: the virus breaks down a person's immune system and eventually death is caused by a series of other opportunistic diseases.

PNG editors need to tread carefully with the new type of coverage in 2005 – showing people living with HIV (PLWA) – and avoid the temptation of using such photographs to sensationalise and sell more newspapers. Wright (2004) questions the usefulness of adopting the dramatic angle with HIV/AIDS stories and argues that, by framing the epidemic as an emergency rather than as a lasting concern, it creates a myopic understanding of the HIV/AIDS epidemic: “Readers are presented with something that demands our attention for just a few fleeting, hysterical moments when we’re actually facing a systematic, decades-long problem” (Wright 2004: 6).

Both newspapers covered the book launch of a PNG lecturer whose brother had died of AIDS. The book entitled: *AIDS: My Brother's Story*, described how hard it was for the lecturer to cope with the fear, stigma and loneliness that his brother experienced. The author pleads for a more caring and compassionate approach to HIV/AIDS sufferers. Again, this is new territory for editors in PNG because it was another rare occasion that they tried to put local faces to the disease. This approach – showing ordinary people living with the disease – can help demystify HIV/AIDS and subsequently reduce stigma and fear. This is probably one of the most positive contributions the press can offer in its coverage (Piot, 2001). The *National* reported two “cure” stories. In one case, a girl was allegedly cured by prayer and this was followed the next day by a similar

story of two other girls experiencing the same healing. While it is difficult for an editor to ignore the “out-of-the-ordinary” aspect of these two stories, it can create a false hope that prayer is the answer to disease. If this was the case, why do so many deeply religious people suffer and die from the disease? Where is the medical evidence to support this story? Former editor of the *National*, Frank Kolma, admitted the risk of including such stories. He had reported the story of a man allegedly being cured of HIV because he took a dose of herbal medicine.

I knew the medicine would not work but it was a good story and it sure sold newspapers that day. I think we were a little irresponsible because there was no medical evidence to suggest the virus had gone from his system. In fact, he died a few days later. May be we should have done a story on his death but we didn't (Kolma 2002).

Week 3: News stories on press coverage of HIV/AIDS during the week of 14-18 March, 2005, showed the *National* reporting six stories and three letters with the *Post-Courier* including three local stories on the disease. All nine stories were local in content and covered a wide range of topics such as warnings and recommendations from political leaders about the need to fight the disease. Other stories looked at the latest HIV/AIDS figures and budgets for the provinces and the mistreatment of people living with AIDS (PLWAs). There were no feature stories in the newspapers or in the weekend magazine sections of both newspapers and no story made it onto the front-page or as an editorial. While regarded as a local health story, headline writers still preferred the use of military metaphors such as in “Counselling vital for fight against AIDS” or “District gets K20,000 to fight AIDS”(National, 16 March).

Table 1a

HIV/AIDS: <i>Post-Courier</i> and <i>The National</i> 1999. Number of News Items. Monthly Totals.						
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	<u>Front-page</u>	<u>Editorial</u>	<u>Feature</u>	<u>Local</u>	<u>Foreign</u>	<u>Letter</u>
January	1	0	0	5	0	1
February	3	1	0	4	2	0
March	1	0	0	4	2	1

Total	5	1	0	13	4	2
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Table 1b

HIV/AIDS: <i>Post-Courier</i> and <i>The National</i> . Type and number of news items. 10-14 January; 14-18 February; 14-18 March 2005.						
	F-page	Editorial	Feature	Local	Foreign	Letter
January	0	0	0	7	3	0
February	2	1	0	7	0	0
March	0	0	0	9	0	3
Total number	2	1	0	23	3	3

Table 1c

HIV/AIDS: News Topics <i>Post-Courier</i> and <i>The National</i> January - March 2005			
	<u>Post-Courier</u>	<u>The National</u>	<u>Totals</u>
<u>Figures</u>	4	3	7
<u>Workshops</u>	3	5	8
<u>Harms</u>	2	4	6
<u>Cures</u>	1	2	3
<u>MI</u>	0	0	0
<u>PWA</u>	2	2	4
<u>Human Interest</u>	1	3	4
Total Number	13	19	32

Summary of findings

A key aim of this study was to try to answer three questions:

1. Has the coverage of the disease in PNG increased or decreased since the results of the last study which were carried out in 1999 and published in 2000?
2. Have the topics changed?
3. And how do news stories strive to educate people about protection and prevention?

Although the data were limited – a selection of all news items on HIV/AIDS in a one-week period in mid-January, mid-February and mid-March 2005 – there were enough to provide some understanding of current trends.

News coverage of the disease increased in both newspapers during the period of study. Compared to the last research in 1999, the *National* recorded more news items in the three selected weeks in 2005 than the whole of the first three months of 1999; 13 compared to 19 news stories in 2005 (Cullen 2000: 156). Tables 1a and 1b show that the *Post-Courier* reported 10 stories on HIV/AIDS for the first three months of 1999 compared with 13 in 2005 (Cullen, 2000. p.150). The *National* had more news stories on HIV in the first three months of 2005: 19 compared with 13 in the *Post-Courier*. The author was unable to interview the editors of both newspapers and so it is difficult to present definite reasons for this difference. One possibility is that the *National* has a health page where HIV/AIDS stories can be placed and a health reporter who can report on the disease. In contrast, the *Post-Courier* is yet to resume its health page or employ a full-time health reporter. Nearly all the news items and letters were local in content, showing that the disease was framed and understood as a problem within the country. There were no feature articles in either daily newspaper, not even in the weekend magazine editions.

The scope and focus of press coverage, however, did not change. Workshops, the latest figures for HIV/AIDS and “harms” scored the largest number of stories, mimicking the results of Cullen’s previous study (Cullen 2000: 166). The category “harms” refers to a news story that describes the consequences of contracting HIV, namely sickness, stigma and death. Attempts to humanise the story resulted in four stories on people living with AIDS (PLWAs) and four human interest stories about people caring for those living with the disease. These figures are higher than in the first three months of 1999 (Table 1c) and such stories help move the story into a real community setting. News items on prevention and protection, however, were not reported in the 2005 study and only one such item appeared in the corresponding period in the first three months of 1999 (Cullen, 2000: 70). This is a significant finding (Table 1c) – that none of the news items contained direct

educational messages about ways to avoid infection. This is particularly worrying when considering that the number of HIV infections in PNG continues to show large increases in all 20 provinces and figures could reach Sub-Saharan African proportions in a few years (Piot 2005).

Information v Educational messages

Previous research that analysed all news items and feature articles on HIV/AIDS in the *National* and *Post-Courier*, from January 1998 to December 1999, revealed more emphasis on soft news items rather than information about avoiding “risk behaviour” (Cullen, 2000: 66). This portrayed a sense of helplessness that there was nothing that could contain the spread of the disease. The inclusion of Mobilising Information (MI) – educational news items and features about diseases and how to avoid infection – adds a sense of balance by encouraging participation and hope. Kristiansen and Harding (1984) developed the concept of MI in the mid-1980s after their research into the standard of health reporting in Britain and HIV/AIDS in particular. Although it is difficult to calculate the influence of MI on behavioural patterns, its omission removes vital information for challenging risk behaviours.

There was no significant reference to MI in the *National* or *Post-Courier* during the data collection of this study in early 2005. The author was unable to question the editors about this but previous research on the lack of MI in other newspapers show that journalists frequently confuse MI with mobilising messages and regard the latter as clearly partisan (Kristiansen and Harding 1984: 364). And while the journalists view their role as providing information rather than motivation, the inclusion of MI in news items on HIV/AIDS, fosters feelings of greater control and the possibility of behavioural change. Research has shown that MI communications are likely to promote a given behaviour, when specific details about actions that will counteract or prevent the health threat, are explicitly and precisely described (Kristiansen and Harding 1984: 365). Admittedly, the two daily newspapers in PNG have tried to insert educational messages in their newspapers. For example, there was a mixed reaction to the use of the word “Koap”, a strong and explicit term – introduced into HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns by the National AIDS Council – to describe sexual

intercourse. The editor of the *National* omitted the word from his newspaper because he said it was too strong and explicit. Yet, these are challenging times in PNG and it demands both innovation and determination to overcome cultural sensitivities when using certain descriptive phrases.

In stark contrast to the absence of MI in press coverage of HIV/AIDS in PNG, are the results of an extensive study of print coverage of HIV/AIDS in the United States from 1981-2002. Carried out by the Kaiser family foundation, the study involved a comprehensive review of more than 9,000 HIV/AIDS related stories in four national newspapers: *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and *USA today*; three regional newspapers; *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Miami Herald*, *Los Angeles Times* and finally, news stories from *The Times* in London, so that a comparison could be made between US print media and European print media. Researchers found 13 per cent of all news items were allocated to educational messages about HIV prevention and protection (Kaiser Foundation, 2003). This was the most prominent category among 13 others (over the 21-year study period) that included testing, political issues, research, transmission, social issues, government funding, public figures, reviews, fundraising, effects and epidemiology. All these issues are linked to the disease but in PNG only a few are highlighted.

And there are calls for a wider and more positive contribution to the content of current press coverage of HIV. Bill Gates (2004), CEO of Microsoft, speaking at the United Nations launch of the Global Media Initiative (GMI) to educate people on how to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS, urged editors and media managers to widen the scope for their stories:

The AIDS story is just not a bad story there is so much that's positive about this that it doesn't have to be viewed as something that is incredibly negative... It's a story of volunteers, about people preserving, about families coming together" (Gates 2004).

Conclusion

The findings from this paper together with the extent of HIV/AIDS epidemic in PNG prompt a key question: to what extent do the press in PNG (and the press in other parts of the world) have a responsibility to educate the public as opposed to

focusing only on reporting the news? One way to illustrate this is by using the example of an unusual tide (potentially of tsunami proportions) coming towards the PNG shore. Is it enough just to tell people that it is coming, or should the story include warnings about fleeing to higher ground so they can protect and *save* themselves?

While current and former editors and journalists from the *Post-Courier* and the *National* newspapers should be highly commended for consistently tracking and reporting the spread of the disease for the past decade, it may be time to shift focus and to balance information with educational content. It is not a question of whether this approach is more effective but rather a recognition that both elements are an essential part of reporting the story regardless of their impact on reducing the rate of HIV infections. Admittedly, some would disagree with this statement and stress that the role of the press in reporting HIV/AIDS is still unclear and limited and arguing that better information and education on HIV equals improved health outcomes is problematic. Also, the press is not always regarded as the most reliable source for such information. The debate continues.

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