

By promoting reporting and discussion on HIV/AIDS in the media, the column contributed to a gradual opening of policy dialogue in the country.



CRISPIN HUGHES/PANOS PICTURES

A KENYAN MAN READS A NEWSPAPER IN NAIROBI, ILLUSTRATING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF HIV PREVENTION INFORMATION TO THE KENYAN PUBLIC THROUGH A NEWSPAPER COLUMN.

AIDS WATCH: INFORMING KENYANS ABOUT HIV/AIDS THROUGH A NEWSPAPER COLUMN

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INTRODUCTION

AIDS Watch, a popular column that appeared in the Sunday edition of the *East African Standard* from 1993 to 1996, was Kenya's only weekly newspaper column dedicated solely to the discussion of HIV/AIDS and related issues. Every week thousands of readers received information and insights on HIV prevention and care for those already infected with the virus.

The column was started in 1991 by a well-known TV journalist, Raphael Tuju, with support from the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO support ended after a few months, however, and in 1993 the AIDS Control and Prevention (AIDSCAP) Project, implemented by Family Health International and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), decided to revive AIDS Watch. AIDSCAP signed a contract with the journalist's media consulting firm, ACE Communications, based in Nairobi, to research and write a weekly column, and the editors of *The Standard* agreed to publish it in the Sunday magazine.

Although AIDS Watch was aimed at both rural and urban audiences, its primary target audiences lived in the urban areas where *The Standard* had its highest circulation. In 1993 urban areas in Kenya already had an estimated

HIV-prevalence rate of 11 per cent, compared to a rural prevalence of about 4 per cent. Readers of *The Standard* include opinion leaders, such as government officials, junior and senior managers in businesses and institutions, educators and heads of households, as well as housewives and secondary school students. The column was placed in the Sunday magazine specifically to reach youth, who are more likely to read the magazine than other sections of the paper.

When the column resumed under AIDSCAP, public discussion about HIV/AIDS was still very limited. Much of what appeared in the media was sensational and ill-informed. Sexual behaviours and their relationship to HIV were not discussed. And Kenyan newspapers, including *The Standard*, restricted discussion of condoms and refused to run photos of the prophylactics.

AIDS Watch encouraged behaviour change at several levels—individual, social and policy—to achieve different but complementary objectives. The major objective of the column was to inform Kenyans about HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), to correct myths and misinformation and to promote discussion. The column also aimed to sensitize readers in order to help them change their risky sexual beliefs, attitudes and practices. Other important

objectives were to reduce discriminatory attitudes and behaviours toward people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) and to rally support for prevention and care among opinion leaders and the general public.

OPENING A DIALOGUE

The AIDS Watch project was fortunate in being able to build on the AIDS column that had run in *The Standard* in 1991. As a result of that experience, the newspaper's editors recognized the need for such a column. They also knew that the work of journalist Raphael Tuju, who had been writing columns for them on various issues since 1980, was popular with their readers, and that his celebrity gave the newspaper and the column a higher profile.

More than 100 AIDS Watch columns were published over three years. The columns were reviewed by AIDSCAP and Kenya's National AIDS Control Programme staff and were based solidly on research from scientists, status reports from scientific institutions, focus group discussions and interviews. Those interviewed for the column included professionals and PLHA and their families and friends.

Identifying the right people to interview was a challenge. Stigmatization of PLHA is still pervasive in Kenya, and many were afraid to reveal their HIV status to family, friends and acquaintances, let alone give interviews to the press. Even some physicians were reluctant to be interviewed about HIV/AIDS. Thus, organizations for PLHA, such as the Kenya AIDS Society and the Society for Persons with AIDS in Kenya, were instrumental in finding individuals who were willing to speak about how the disease had affected their lives. Others were drawn to share

their experiences through the column because of the sensitivity with which subject was addressed.

Another challenge was finding the time and resources needed to do the thorough research that was required for the weekly column and to answer hundreds of letters from readers. The project hired a full-time researcher, who was assisted by several part-time researchers at various times during the project, to review the current literature and consult with experts on the topics covered in the column and in responses to individual readers' letters. This researcher, who had a master's degree in journalism, also made monthly visits to rural areas to interview people and collect information. The columnist spent one day writing each weekly column. The time involved in responding to letters varied, based on the number of letters received each week and the types of questions asked. A standard reply that could be personalized was designed to answer the most frequently asked questions, but more specific questions required extra attention.

AIDS Watch encouraged letters from readers and became recognized as a reliable source for personal advice. All correspondents received a reply including a booklet of HIV/AIDS information that had been produced by the Kenyan Red Cross. Some also received referrals to sources of help in their areas. As part of the AIDS Watch Project, ACE Communications and AIDSCAP built relationships with a core team of professionals, including physicians, social workers and counsellors, to whom readers could be referred. Collaborating organizations included the Kenya Federation of Employers, the Kenya AIDS Society, the Association of People with AIDS and Kenyatta National Hospital.

READERS RESPOND

Readers' letters revealed that many people, though aware of HIV/AIDS, were uncertain of some basic facts. Typical questions included: "Can condoms really protect one from getting infected by HIV? ", "How is the virus transmitted? ", "Is it true that the virus can be transmitted through eating fish? ", "Can shaking hands spread AIDS?"; "What symptoms will show that one has the AIDS-causing virus HIV?"

The letters also provided insight on how the epidemic was affecting individuals and families. People living with the virus were often neglected and lacked money to buy food and medicine. Many families and communities were grappling with the problem of caring for orphans as more and more people died of AIDS.

"My relatives ceased to care about me," one person wrote. "I no longer mattered to them. During the good times my house was always full with relatives." Another noted: "When one member of the family is infected, the whole family suffers."

This input from readers became increasingly important in shaping the column. In response to readers' needs and the changing realities of the epidemic in Kenya, the column moved beyond the "ABCs" of HIV transmission and prevention to address a broader range of issues. These included care of AIDS patients, living with HIV, orphans, and the vulnerability of youth and women to HIV. The column did not shy away from sensitive topics such as condom use and traditional cultural practices that increase the risk of HIV transmission, and it made some hard-hitting attacks on discrimination and ignorance.

Replying to readers' questions about condoms in the column proved an effective

way to broach this controversial topic at a time when newspapers restricted such discussion. This approach also made it possible to combat misinformation without being accusatory. The information was reported ("We've been hearing about condoms being laced with the HIV virus"), then facts and expert opinion were presented.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Although funding was not available for a rigorous evaluation of the AIDS Watch project, the response to the column indicates that it provided a much-needed and useful service. A survey conducted by the *Sunday Standard* in 1996 found that within a short period of time AIDS Watch had become one of the paper's five most popular columns.

Based on the survey results and the circulation figures for *The Standard*, it can be assumed that AIDS Watch reached a large audience. *The Standard* sells 70,000 copies of its Sunday edition and has an estimated readership of 350,000.

AIDS Watch received about 1,400 letters from readers. The content of these letters suggests that the project achieved its objective of informing people and promoting discussion about HIV/AIDS. For many correspondents, the column and personal responses from AIDS Watch were their only source of accurate information about HIV/AIDS.

The column's role in encouraging dialogue about HIV/AIDS was most notable on the subject of condoms. As the first newspaper column in Kenya to discuss condoms and include photos of the device, AIDS Watch was responsible for changing the policies of several newspapers that had restricted publication of information about condoms. It also appeared

to encourage other newspapers to report on the HIV/AIDS pandemic by raising issues that the media had not covered before. AIDS Watch was quoted several times in the *Daily Nation* and other Kenyan newspapers.

By promoting reporting and discussion on HIV/AIDS in the media, the column contributed to a gradual opening of policy dialogue in the country. Many of the issues it raised were addressed in a law passed by the Kenyan parliament in 1997 that represents the country's first national policy on HIV/AIDS.

The column also helped foster understanding of the difficulties faced by people living with HIV/AIDS. In Busia and Nairobi, for example, several PLHA and their families received help from people who had read about their plight in AIDS Watch. Readers wrote in asking how they could volunteer their services to support HIV/AIDS causes, and more than 20 people called to offer assistance to some of the individuals featured in the column. One person even arrived in *The Standard* newsroom with food and money to give to one family affected by HIV/AIDS.

QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

A qualitative assessment of AIDSCAP media activities in Kenya also provided some insights into how the column was perceived and how it might have affected the target audiences. Two focus group discussions on AIDS Watch were held: one with young trainee journalists and the other with NGO programme officers working on HIV/AIDS. In addition, key informant interviews were held with the two *Standard* editors responsible for the column and with the columnist himself. The purpose of these discussions was to gather additional information

about the column's effectiveness in achieving its objectives and to assess whether there was still a role for a newspaper column about HIV/AIDS.

All respondents thought that the column had effectively contributed to raising awareness and changing attitudes and behaviour. According to the trainee journalists, the column significantly increased awareness in urban areas of high-risk sexual behaviour and of the needs of PLHA. Those interviewed also indicated that the column had succeeded in humanizing the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as many of the PLHA in Kenya who went public about their HIV status did so through the column. It was reported that parents used the column to educate their children.

Responses showed satisfaction with the way the column had handled regional issues in multicultural Kenya. Material for the column was collected from different parts of the country, particularly in areas most affected by the disease. It was thought that potentially divisive cultural issues such as circumcision, polygamy and wife inheritance had been addressed effectively in the column, with openness and moderation.

The column appeared to have satisfied the informational needs of members of both focus groups. Journalism students interviewed spoke of having learned about how to cope with HIV/AIDS, AIDS symptoms, condoms and the importance of abstinence. NGO programme managers talked about how they had used information from the column in their work. For example, one manager said that an article on AIDS orphans had been of immense use to her organization. Another manager photocopied the columns for use in an NGO resource centre.

The respondents recommended reviving the column, but made the following recommendations to improve its effectiveness:

- Address different audiences, such as youth (including young girls and out-of-school youth), senior management executives and people in rural areas.
- Focus more attention on condom use.
- Publish the column once a month, in order to give more time for preparation.
- Use other print media, such as the Kiswahili-language dailies and youth newspapers, to reach different audiences effectively.
- Build a monitoring and evaluation system into the project. This could include, but should not be limited to, an anonymous panel of selected readers providing feedback on each column.

LESSONS LEARNED

AIDS Watch derived most of its strength from the fact that it covered issues raised by readers. It was a communication process, not a monologue. The column's interactive style enabled it to be responsive to readers' information needs and provided an acceptable context for addressing controversial topics and countering misinformation.

It was essential to establish the credibility of the AIDS Watch column so that it could challenge the inaccurate information about HIV/AIDS routinely disseminated in the Kenyan media. The most important strategy for establishing credibility was the decision to support a column written by a well-known and respected journalist who already had wide public recognition from his work as a TV newsreader. Other effective strategies included

sending prompt and reliable responses to all letters sent to AIDS Watch and building linkages with medical and counselling services. A box appeared in each column advising readers that "your letters are answered confidentially by a team of experts at the Kenya National AIDS Control Programme."

Focus group participants agreed that the journalistic skills of the people involved in the project were also important. They identified the ability to interview PLHA, collect information from authoritative sources and convey it in clear, compelling terms as factors key to the success of the AIDS Watch column.

BEST PRACTICE CRITERIA

Relevance When the AIDS Watch column began running in 1993, Kenyan society was in denial about a national HIV epidemic that had already affected more than three-quarters of a million people. Public information about the virus and its prevention was severely limited and often inaccurate. Survey results, qualitative research and the volume and content of hundreds of letters from AIDS Watch readers showed that people needed such an authoritative and responsive source of information about HIV/AIDS.

Efficiency The newspaper column directed the attention of the public to the epidemic in an easily accessible form, reaching a large number of readers in high-prevalence urban areas. Ongoing feedback from readers' letters provided a way to monitor whether the column was meeting peoples' needs. The column was written in an easy-to-read style, maximizing its impact among the functionally literate population.

Effectiveness/Impact Although rigorous evaluation of the project was not undertaken, letters from readers and data from qualitative research suggest that the project met its objectives of informing Kenyans about HIV/AIDS prevention and care, encouraging discussion about the topic and changing attitudes toward people living with HIV/AIDS. The column was named one of the Sunday *Standard's* top five columns in a poll taken by the newspaper. AIDS Watch was also the first column in Kenya to discuss condoms, which led to several newspapers changing their editorial policy on the subject.

Ethical Soundness The columnist and researchers were careful to protect the anonymity of those who requested advice through the column. Readers' letters were usually published under a pseudonym, and the names of people interviewed for the column were often changed. Those who did not request anonymity were counselled about the possible consequences of going public. Each person who agreed to be profiled in the column with a photo signed a waiver granting permission and accepting the possible stigmatization he or she might experience.

Sustainability *The Standard* editors and others interviewed as part of the qualitative assessment of the project believe that the quality of the writing is the key to sustaining a column such as AIDS Watch. If a columnist can present such difficult subject matter in a way that engages readers, editors will be willing to provide editorial space. Some other organizations and individuals have had to pay

to publish HIV/AIDS information in Kenyan newspapers. More formal linkages with HIV/AIDS organizations might help support the research required to write columns and answer readers' questions.

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