

be ensured that it is a forum for the whole faculty, and that researchers of all schools and divisions are seen as equal partners.

Although a common comment was that the forum was an ideal place for a young researcher to present, it was clear that registrars in the School of Medicine are not regular presenters. With the introduction of a compulsory research component in the MMed programme from 2008, registrars should be actively encouraged to present at the forum. The newly introduced prize for the best case presentation at the forum is a way of encouraging young researchers.

An evaluative study to determine the effectiveness of a primary school-based HIV/AIDS learning intervention on the knowledge of the learners

To the Editor: In July 2007 a pilot study was conducted to determine whether a book designed by the author, who was an MBChB V student at the time, to teach primary school children about HIV was successful in conveying important and difficult concepts in a way that enabled the children to understand and remember them. The participants included 32 grade seven learners from Emahhashini Primary School. Emahhashini is part of the Wembezi township in the Umtshezi municipality, Kwazulu Natal Midlands. Here HIV and AIDS are an everyday part of life. Many children in Emahhashini Primary School are either infected with HIV, or have family members suffering from the disease. HIV has become entwined in the traditions and cultural practices of people in the area. "Mass burials" are a weekly occurrence in the community as a result of AIDS-related deaths.

All learners were Zulu speaking but had English as their language of instruction. No selection process was used and all learners who were present on the first day were entered into the study. The usual Life Orientation lessons were used for this purpose.

Figure 1: This is the local cemetery and is commonly referred to as "the place where young girls are buried". Graves were being prepared for the following day.¹



The control data was based on written tests and discussion sessions. The discussions focused on six key terms discussed in the book. These terms were: ARVs, Resistance, Virus, HIV, DNA and T-cell. The control data stems from previous knowledge gained from Life Orientation classes on the school syllabus, and from general knowledge. There was a vast difference in test results among individual learners. This could be related to differences in knowledge of HIV, or due to differences in language ability. The Life Orientation content and other current education measures focus on the impact of HIV and how it can be prevented.¹ Whilst this is important, the aim of the book used in the study was to reinforce the existing material and, in addition, to create a more complete understanding of what the virus is, how it works and how it can be controlled.

The research infrastructure in the faculty needs attention. The call for applications for research assistance in the School of Medicine in November 2007 was definitely timely.

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The new material was taught to the learners through reading and explanation of the book's concepts to the class in an interactive manner. Test and discussion sessions were held with all learners before and immediately after the intervention to look for improvements in the knowledge and understanding of the important concepts discussed in the book.

A significant improvement was seen in the written test as well as in the discussions. From virtually no knowledge of the mechanism of HIV and related concepts, the learners were able to understand these terms as well as remember them, showing that the book was a successful teaching tool. Seventy-eight per cent of the learners showed an improvement of more than 10%.

Table 1: Improvement groupings

Improvement (%)	0	10	20	30	40	70
No of learners	7	9	12	2	1	1

Key

%	Improvement in understanding
0	None
10	Slight
20	Moderate
30	Good
40	Excellent
> 50	Outstanding

Because there was only one grade seven class at this school, the class consisted of learners with varying levels of intelligence and literacy skills. However, an overall improvement indicates that learners at this level responded well to the book. This implies that the book should be equally successful with other grade seven learners with English as the language of instruction. Unfortunately, these results cannot be applied to learners outside of this demographic. A more detailed study will have to be done across different grade levels to establish from which age or grade this book is appropriate and effective.

Picture books explaining difficult, but important concepts in an interesting and understandable manner succeed in teaching these concepts in a way that enables young children to both understand and remember them. The content of the book succeeds in bridging the existing gap in HIV information taught to primary school children. The focus of the intervention is to ensure that children understand these fundamental concepts concerning HIV. As a result, material taught to them as part of the school curriculum, as well as from external sources, will be better understood. The intention of the book is to reinforce existing HIV/AIDS education, and create a more complete understanding of the virus by young children.

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Note: Many of the statements made were concluded from discussions with teachers and learners and from personal opinion.