

AIDS: Views of Rural High School Students as expressed in an Essay Competition

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Abstract

An essay competition for high school students in the Manguzi sub-district of KwaZuluNatal, with the topic "AIDS: What can we do?" provided an opportunity to gain insights into students' understanding of the disease. The 668 entries were scrutinised and the expressed ideas of the students were grouped into a number of themes, which included the meaning of AIDS, transmission and

prevention of AIDS, the reason for and threat of AIDS, and possible solutions to the problem of AIDS. Although students demonstrated good awareness of the issues around HIV/AIDS, they also expressed much confusion and misunderstanding, together with a desire for more information. The concepts expressed by students can help to inform educational programmes in high schools.

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Introduction

A significant amount of energy is being expended on educational programmes about AIDS; Manguzi sub-district has a full time "AIDS team" responsible for AIDS-related health education, together with a school health team and also a group of community volunteers spreading the message at the grassroots level. Furthermore, there is a high incidence of the disease in this area. In an informal survey at Manguzi in 1996, 23.75% of women attending antenatal clinic were HIV positive. The latest antenatal survey puts the level in KwaZuluNatal at 36.2% (Health-e News). It is thus important

to evaluate the extent of knowledge about AIDS amongst students.

In 1995 the fourth annual Manguzi Easter Essay Competition for secondary schools was held in the Manguzi sub-district, in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal. The objectives of the competition were both to promote the ability to write in English and to stimulate interest and debate amongst youth on health issues. Nine schools entered with 668 students submitting entries. The format of this competition has been described previously¹.

The topic selected for that year was "AIDS: What can we do?" This topic was

chosen in conjunction with representatives from the Kwa Ngwanase Youth Organisation, representing young people in the area, and thus focussed on an issue which was not only of interest to health professionals but also to students themselves. It was hoped that by the involvement of the youth themselves in deciding on the topic, the essays would be given greater attention.

The essay competition provided a good opportunity to assess some students' knowledge of AIDS. Thus, an analysis was done of the essay entries in order to understand these students' knowledge of the disease.

Methods

All 668 entries in the 1995 competition were carefully read and a list of statements made by students was drawn up, reflecting their knowledge, perceptions and attitudes. The frequency of these statements was recorded, together with common or key quotes, which epitomised the particular understanding. Essays were

crosschecked between the authors to ensure agreement.

To ensure the greatest possible accuracy in reflecting student knowledge, only unambiguous statements were recorded and not those which left room for alternate interpretation. This was particularly difficult because of the poor

standard of English usage in many of the essays. This may have affected results.

The process was thus purely descriptive of the entries received. It is not intended to be representative, but nevertheless provides a useful way of understanding actual knowledge of students.

Results

Fifty six percent (374) of students expressed an awareness of what AIDS stands for and an understanding of the **meaning** of the abbreviation. To quote one student, AIDS means "Immune deficiency because the virus attacks the immune system, the body's protection against disease and makes it deficient meaning that it does not work properly." Another student explains that it is a virus that "has destroyed your immune system leaving you unprotected against infection and cancer."

113 students (17%) mentioned the existence of the AIDS antibody test. One student explains, "Just visit your doctor and ask him for blood test. The blood test will assume if your partner is good to be in sex with."

In terms of **transmission**, 549 (82%) clearly stated that AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease. Fifty-three (8%) specifically noted seminal/vaginal fluids as the mode.

Transmission via wounds/blood contact was mentioned by 252 (38%), often expressed as the fear of helping a fellow injured "footballer partner" or accident victim, 199 (30%) mentioned the use of razor blades ("minoras") used by traditional healers, 156 (23%), mentioned "dirty needles/injections, and 59 (9%) indicated the risks of intravenous drug abuse. Mother-to-foetus transmission was noted by 156 (23%) and contraction of AIDS via blood transfusions by 44 (7%). A further 119

(18%) feared shared toothbrushes as a mode of transmission.

Although 161 students (24%) mentioned that one couldn't contract AIDS via casual contact, there remained misconceptions about the transmission of AIDS through means other than blood and body fluid contact. Twenty-seven (4%) mentioned means of casual contact as modes of transmission, e.g. sharing a spoon, coughing, being in the same room, holding hands, sharing toilets, by mosquito bites, and "like chicken pox". Said one student, "We must not sit or stay next to person who is suffering from aids because aids will come and sit on you, as a result an aids germ/HIV will be transmitted to you."

Given the theme of the competition ("What Can We Do?"), much of the essay content was focussed on **prevention**. Having one faithful partner was mentioned by 368 students (55%); in the words of one student, the way to prevent AIDS is "by being faithful to one partner who is not infected and who is faithful to you." 42% (283) went further to a general call for abstinence, especially before marriage. One student advised "staying a virgin without sex is not going to make you weak, ill or infertile or lessen your sexual powers later." The majority of students (72%) specifically mentioned the use of the condom as a method of preventing HIV. One student admitted, "If you is person whom live in this world you can't live without having sexy. Because sex is nature. So the best method that you

can do is to use condom." It was clearly expressed by 183 (21%) that one's risk increases with more sexual partners. This was poetically explained in one essay, "The another thing which you must bear on your minds is, that the more the flower is beautiful, the more bees or insects are attracted to be caught."

The confusion between birth control and disease protection was previously found in an analysis of essays on the subject of family planning¹. In this group, 9 expressed that misunderstanding, most clearly stated as follows: "By using Birth Control pills we can control Aids." Of course, one cannot assume that those who did not mention it did not think the same.

The most unusual preventative measure mentioned was that "if peoples eat salad it can prevent aids."

Various **interpretations** were given for the AIDS phenomenon. 1% (69) expressed the belief that AIDS originated from America or from Foreigners. Some of the interesting expressions of this belief were the following 3 students' views:

"It is when the scientist was busy crossbreeding the viruses in the laboratory, the things got out of control, that causing the Aids come into being."

"This disease was started when one of the white woman meet sex with a gorilla in sex"

"Aids is from the foreigners disease

because if they arrive Durban and Cape Town they like to sleep with the girls of South Africa.”

The myth that AIDS is an acronym standing for “American Idea to Discourage Sex” was mentioned by 9% (61). Although most of these discounted this as mere rumour, there was some confusion, as expressed by one: “AIDS is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes and some say AIDS is American Ideas which destroy sex. I don’t know what is correct and there are many description of AIDS.” Furthermore 6 students (1%) clearly stated a belief in the myth. This was expressed in one essay: “It is an American Idea of destroying sex why because this is coming from over Seas. It is not from here in South Africa. When we take steps back to the Old Order the rate of reproduction was not like this days. So the white saw that the rate of unwanted population is too high by that way they tried to get the way of decreasing that.”

AIDS was also described by 82 students (12%) as a punishment from God, for promiscuous sexual behaviour or uncontrolled population growth. One student discounted the previous concepts in order to expound on this one: “Some they say ‘Aids comes from the whites’. I disagree with those. Why? Because even the whites do not know. If Aids comes from Whites, ask yourself this question. How did the Blacks get it because last time the Blacks were not allowed to marry with the Whites? I say Aids comes from God.”

AIDS is clearly viewed as a **threat to the community** and the under-

standing of its consequences in terms of both the individual and society was marked; 549 (82%) stated that AIDS equals death, 26% of whom (141) used the actual phrase “AIDS is a killer”. Also 342 (51%) expressed that they were aware that there is no cure. As one student wrote, somewhat hopelessly, “There is no medicine or any chemicals in order to use it if you are affected by Aids. The Doctors, Witchdoctors and Izangoma all in this world they failed to get final medicine.” 25 (4%) mentioned the rumour that traditional healers know a cure, though one of these discounted this.

Students found it difficult to find any **solutions** to the problem, even though that was part of what was expected from the title of the essay. Most expressed the feeling that prevention is better than cure. Forty-eight students (7%) advocated the use of the Church for AIDS education. In the words of one entrant, “We must teach people about aids and use pictures so that people will see results of sex. The ministers and preachers must be strong preaching, teaching and asking God to help us.” Similarly, according to 73 (11%), parents should be responsible for, and/or take an active role in AIDS education. “In African Culture parent don’t explain these thing or talk about the facts of life. Parent must be persuaded to talk on the subject because, it can save their children lives.” As part of this, change in behaviour was seen as important. To quote two students, “We as students to protect ourselves from this disease we must change our character which will not lead us to be affected by the disease” and “We can’t get this disease if we respect ourselves.”

Other suggestions included:

- Prayer - “People must never forget to prey [sic] to the King of Kings by the name of god because he is the only way to fight against aids.”
- Multi-media presentations - “Dramatisation, singing, video-watching, using photographs ought awaken society to take rid of such a dangerous monster.”
- Legal injunctions - “If the government make the law of preventing all people to sleep with a girl or boy without marriage would be better.”
- And sex education - “Community to combat aids they must teach their children about sex education special children from 12 years upwards.”

Seventy eight students (12%) mentioned “prostitutes” as a problem to be dealt with - “Lets by all of you means to finished prostitutes in the world because there are carried AIDS to the whole world.” 18 (3%) felt the State should kill or imprison those with AIDS - “According to my opinion is that if there is person who have this disease in that area they must kill her or his, in order to prevent the spreading of Aids”; “The way of preventing this disease, pupils who had that germs they must be captured together.”

Fortunately though there were those who advocated compassion, such as the student who wrote: “People who have aids must not be locked away in a special room, away from other people. They need to be with the people they love. It is safe, and right, for you to give them this help.” And for the individual, there was room for optimism: “This is your life. Take care your life. I believe if take care your life the Aids can stop.”

Discussion

It is encouraging to see that the great majority of students (82%) were aware that AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, a similar percentage to that found in another survey of South African high school students, in a peri-urban context³. Likewise, it is

reassuring to note that most students (82%) are aware of the fatal consequences of AIDS. Hopefully this awareness has increased in the intervening years. However, in terms of preventing the disease, the outlook is not as hopeful. Although the majority

(72%) were aware of condoms as a method of preventing HIV transmission – more than in the other survey cited² – this gives no indication as to how frequently condoms are used. Moreover, just half of the students (55%) discussed the need for a single, faithful partner,

and only 21% expressed the danger of multiple partners.

Furthermore, many misconceptions were revealed about ways of spreading the virus and of preventing its spread. These need to be addressed if any serious impact is to be made on at-risk behaviour.

The interpretation of AIDS as Western propaganda to limit "the growth of the Black Nation", though often discounted, was mentioned frequently enough to suggest it is still held as legitimate. Recent debates in the columns of major newspapers have confirmed this. This is a serious threat to AIDS education. There also remains some association of AIDS with social deviance, as indicated by statements about AIDS as a punishment from God, the mention made of prostitutes, the argument that AIDS victims should be incarcerated or exterminated, and the fact that many students evidently not only fear AIDS, but fear people with AIDS. This interpretation of AIDS as affecting the social deviants of society may indicate that students do not consider AIDS to be something that can happen to them. However, this interpretation also translates into a clear call for changes in personal behaviour by a significant minority of students (e.g. 42% calling for sexual abstinence before marriage).

This analysis thus indicates that although a great deal of essential AIDS information has reached the schoolyard, much remains to be done. Education is

needed to clear up the misconceptions and to move students beyond the simplistic idea that the condom is the answer to the AIDS problem.

Students express their own felt need to be better informed, and this should be approached through schools, parents, youth organisations and churches. Above all, students need to be moved past the theoretical understandings expressed here to the point of significant behaviour change, which is the most critical and the most difficult issue. This task is complicated by an education system, which is based on the rote learning of facts with no relevance to life, though this may be changing with outcomes-based education. Only extensive lifestyle/sex education programmes which emphasize skills and social behaviour rather than knowledge², together with peer support groups and contact with HIV positive peers, have any hope of achieving this.

The problems with the use of these essays as a research tool are acknowledged. The students are volunteers motivated by an opportunity to win worthwhile prizes who will thus have researched information, formally and informally, before presenting it. One can expect to obtain a best-case scenario a view of information at the student's disposal. Furthermore, the essays were written for a known audience of medical personnel, and were therefore written with the intent of fulfilling that group's expected demand. It can be assumed that

misconceptions and inadequacies are under-emphasized. The essays were written in the student's second language (English), therefore were subject to inherent limitations in expressing knowledge. It is thus quite possible that the students possess greater knowledge than expressed by survey results, for they could have been discouraged with the exercise of writing outside their mother tongue.

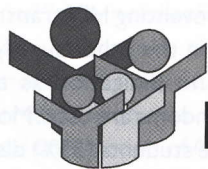
On the positive side, this method allows students to use their own words and to express whatever is foremost on their minds concerning AIDS. The competition structure was left purposely open-ended; the entries provide to be very diverse in approach and direction. Furthermore, the competition design was mutually beneficial to both surveyors and entrants. Thus not only could current student knowledge and culture concerning AIDS be understood, but also individuals were encouraged and rewarded for examining and expressing their feelings on the topic.

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