

The Government's Involvement in
Promoting Public Awareness on AIDS
in Hong Kong
-A position paper

Advisory Council on AIDS
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POSITION PAPER: THE GOVERNMENT'S INVOLVEMENT IN PROMOTING PUBLIC AWARENESS ON AIDS IN HONG KONG

Background

1. In 1985, the first case of AIDS was diagnosed in Hong Kong. In the same year, public education activities were initiated by the then Medical and Health Department, through the newly established AIDS Counseling and Health Education Service. A territory-wide media campaign on AIDS was launched by the Government in 1987, and with it the formation of the Committee on Education and Publicity on AIDS. In 1988, the World Health Organization declared that the first of December be commemorated as the World AIDS Day. Two years later in 1990, the first local non-governmental organization on AIDS was born. Thereafter public awareness activities on AIDS have become a regular feature in the AIDS prevention and care programmes in Hong Kong.

2. Public awareness on AIDS has often been used as a yardstick for assessing the response of the Government and the community. The Government plays an important role in enhancing AIDS awareness, a crucial factor behind an effective AIDS programme. This paper reviews the Government's involvement in promoting public awareness ever since the first cases of HIV/AIDS were diagnosed some sixteen years ago. The evaluation of the level of public AIDS awareness is covered in another paper titled "Should we be satisfied with the current level of public awareness on AIDS in Hong Kong".

A Framework for Evaluation

3. The terms "media", "public" and "publicity" are commonly used in the evaluation of programmes involving the communication of messages on AIDS.

In the following discussion, media refers to the specified forums specializing in the communication with the public, including television, radio, newspapers, telecommunication such as telephone, and internet. Publicity is a general term describing the efforts in disseminating or making information known to a defined or general audience. Public is arbitrarily defined as the general community without a common risk behaviour for HIV spread or factors which might influence the provision of care to those infected.

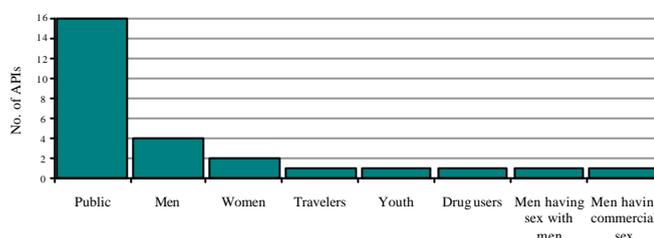
4. In describing the roles of the Government, it is proposed to review the following five aspects of the work on promoting public awareness on AIDS. These are (a) media campaigns, (b) involvement of the media in promoting public awareness, (c) education programmes targeting the public, (d) supporting the activities of community-based organizations, and (e) evaluating the effectiveness of public awareness activities.

Media Campaigns

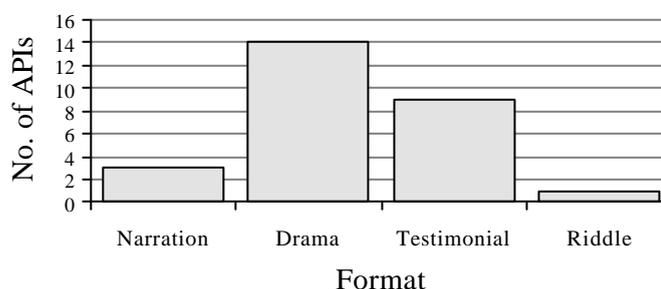
5. Through the coordination and professional support of the Government Information Service (Information Services Department), the Government has been launching media campaigns on an annual basis on subjects of public interest. The funding comes from the central government.

Box 1: Formats of AIDS APIs

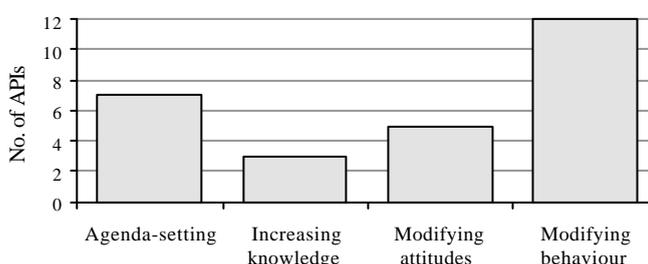
(a) Targets



(b) Presentations



(c) Aims



Between 1987 and 1996, an annual media campaign on AIDS has been launched, involving the production of TV spots (“announcement of public interest” or API) and a variety of parallel activities, for example, exhibitions, posters/leaflets, concerts and press meetings. APIs occupied a central position in these campaigns. The TV and radio APIs produced over the years are listed in Annex I and II.

6. APIs have been used to deliver specific messages on the prevention and care of HIV/AIDS. In addition to reaching a usual member of the public, they can also reach those practising high risk behaviours who are otherwise difficult to be targeted as a community group, for example, drug users, travellers engaging in unsafe sex. Different strategies have been adopted in Hong Kong. Some of the strategies are (a) fear-provoking, (b) using life-style images, (c) providing authoritative messages by featuring celebrities, (d) personal testimony of HIV-infected people and (e) humorous or light-hearted approaches. Box 1 illustrates the formats of these APIs based on a study conducted in 1998¹. APIs have also been used to publicise events, services or important publications, both on TV and on radio.

7. The launching of media campaigns has been made possible through the coordinating and advisory role taken on by a *Publicity Working Group* (1987 to 1996) of the *Committee on Education and Publicity on AIDS*, which was replaced by a *Task Force of Media and Publicity* (1996 to 1999), and more recently a *subcommittee on Media and Publicity* of the *AIDS Prevention and Care Committee*. Both the Department of Health (previously Medical and Health Department) and the Government Information Service were represented in the Advisory Council on AIDS between 1990 and 1993, and the Committee on Education and Publicity on AIDS (renamed AIDS Prevention and Care Committee in 1999) since 1987.

¹ Lee SS, Choi TMY. Using television advertisements for social marketing of AIDS prevention messages. [Abstract] *12th World AIDS Conference* 28 June - 3 July 1998.

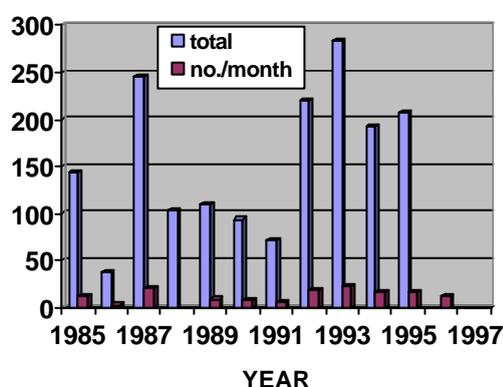
Involvement of the Media in promoting AIDS Awareness

8. Apart from organized campaigns, the media is involved in other ways such as press meetings, reporting of activities, and the invitation to specific events.

9. The Department of Health AIDS Unit has been hosting regular press meetings to communicate with reporters. In the late 80s, these meetings were initially held on a monthly basis to inform the public of the recent trends and problems associated with aspects of HIV/AIDS. Since the beginning of 1994, a quarterly press meeting has been hosted to announce the latest figures from the reporting system on a three-monthly basis. These meetings have become a useful forum for maintaining network with professionals working with the media.

10. As a new medical issue, AIDS often hit the headlines when there were new research findings, changing epidemiological patterns, treatment advances, and reported social consequences. In these circumstances, the Government was usually asked to respond in

Box 2. Number of stories on AIDS in English daily newspapers



connection with the Hong Kong context. The media's interest has been waxing and waning over the years. One study (Box 2) identified 246 stories in the English newspapers in 1987, falling to 71 in 1991 and then rising to 284 in 1993². The first peak coincided with the launching of the first media campaign while the second peak had resulted from the reporting of two incidents – the

² Yeung D. AIDS and the media in Hong Kong – the English media's construction of a social phenomenon in the past ten years. In: Lee SS and Chan CW (eds) In: *The first decade of AIDS in Hong Kong – a collection of essays*. Hong Kong: Advisory Council on AIDS, 1999.

detection of HIV infection in a dentist, and the failure of an HIV positive student to attend school.

11. Finally, the media is often invited to events organised by the Government, for example, exhibitions, seminars. Unlike news stories, however, these activities were rarely covered.

Education Programmes Targeting the General Public

12. Education activities have been organised to specifically convey AIDS messages to members of the public. These differ from media campaigns in their direct delivery of information rather than through TV or radios. They require the identification and the use of appropriate settings. Hotlines and internet are becoming new channels for enhancing public awareness in the recent years. The following are examples of these activities organised by the Government, largely through the AIDS Unit and its Red Ribbon centre, in the past:

- (a) *Workplace* – Community Charter on AIDS project (since 1994)
- (b) *Schools* – seminars for students and teachers (ongoing), Inter-school quiz and Telematch (1994), Hotline promotion in technical colleges (1998)
- (c) *Youth* – Youth Funding Scheme on AIDS project (yearly since 1991), youth concert (1990)
- (d) *Functions in Shopping malls* – AIDS Awareness and Red Ribbon Centre promotion (1996), Hotline and STD/AIDS Awareness (1998), World AIDS Day launching campaign (for example, Positive Response Day in Shatin Town Plaza 1 December 2000).
- (e) *District-based roadshow* – Mongkok district campaign (1994-1995), Roving exhibition in housing estates (1994, 1997, 1999), Bowrington Road Market campaign (1999)
- (f) *Public transport* – exhibitions in MTR stations and railway stations, hotline promotion in ferry piers (1997-1998), Lo Wu Border (1997,

1998)

- (g) *Festivals and carnivals* – Chinese New Year fairs (1993, 1998), travel exhibitions (1993, 1995), health education carnivals (1993), Flea market (1992), sex education carnival (1998), Sex & AIDS Education Expo (1997)
- (h) *Cultural venues* – AIDS awareness exhibitions in City Hall (yearly before 1992), AIDS posters exhibition at Hong Kong Arts Centre (1996), Fifteen Years of AIDS Photo Exhibition (City Hall, Shatin, Tuen Mun and Tsuen Wan Town Hall, 2000).

13. Whereas most of these education programmes generally targeted people without apparent risk of HIV infection, some had been organized to specifically reach people who might engage in risk behaviours, for example travellers (border campaigns and activities in ferry piers), and those who might be involved in commercial sex (street campaigns).

14. The operation of telephone inquiry service used to be one passive means of providing information on health subjects. Advances in information technology have however been revolutionalising this very approach. The application of an interacting response system using pre-recorded messages has replaced conventional telephone inquiries in the commercial and service sectors. The AIDS Hotline³ underwent the same change in early 1993. About 20000 calls were received per month initially, stabilizing at 10000 in 1995 and 5000 in 2000. The success of this new channel of information dissemination has prompted the Department of Health to join hands with the Hong Kong Sex Education Association in their launching of a Dr Sex Hotline⁴ in 1996. The latter project focuses on sex education in young people. Between 20000 to 40000 calls were received in the first year, stabilizing at around 10000 in the last year.

³ The AIDS Hotline (2780 2211) is an information cum counselling telephone line. The recorded messages are accessible 24 hours a day in Cantonese, English and Putonghua. Callers may choose to talk with nurse-counsellors between 8am and 8pm from Monday to Friday.

⁴ Dr Sex Hotline (2337 2121) is an information line for providing pre-recorded messages on sex and sexually transmitted diseases. Callers may choose to listen to the messages in Cantonese, Putonghua or English.

15. The popularity of internet has led to its use as another channel for reaching members of the public. The AIDS Homepage www.info.gov.hk/aids was launched by the Department of Health in early 1996. This was upgraded and renamed “Virtual AIDS Office” in late 1997, with the number of viewers almost doubling each year. (5450, 11696, 21312 and 36324 in 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999 respectively, and 55560 for 2000). Another revamping has just been completed to give the website a new look with revised contents in January 2001.

Supporting Activities of Community-based Organizations

16. In the initial years (between mid- and late-80s), the Government was the only organizer of AIDS awareness activities in Hong Kong. The situation has changed since 1990 when the first NGO was formed. There are now five NGOs working exclusively on the subject of AIDS – Hong Kong AIDS Foundation, AIDS Concern, TeenAIDS, St John’s Cathedral HIV Education Centre, and the Society for AIDS Care. Other major initiatives in the community are: AIDS Project of Council of Social Service, Action for REACHOUT. As far as public awareness is concerned, the Government has been providing technical and resource support to the community’s initiatives.

17. The AIDS Trust Fund was set up in 1993. Apart from providing exgratia payment to HIV infected haemophilia, the Fund has become a main support for HIV prevention and care initiatives in the community. Public awareness projects initiated by the NGOs have been funded.

18. In late 1996, the Red Ribbon Centre was established. The Centre has become a technical supporting arm of the Government in the conduction of, among other things, public awareness projects. The Centre is also a popular venue for organizing activities for enhancing awareness on AIDS. The Government Information Service, on the other hand, has also been providing support through its participation in the work of the *Subcommittee on Media and Publicity* of the *AIDS Prevention and Care Committee*. In the last months, for

example, it has supported the NGOs' initiative in launching a new TV API on the risk of STD/HIV through cross border sex.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Public Awareness Programmes

19. The aggregate impact of awareness campaigns can be assessed by examining the results of surveys of the *Community Research Programme of AIDS* (CRPA), based in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Data were collected in 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, of which the analysis from year 1994 to 1998 had been published. An evaluation based on the results of selected surrogates is described in another paper "Should we be satisfied with the current level of public awareness on AIDS in Hong Kong".

20. The specific impacts of the media campaigns can be illustrated in three other surveys – in (a) 1987/88 when media campaigns were first launched by the Government, (b) 1993 following the screening of an API on condom, and (c) more recently after a campaign featuring a celebrity to advise on HIV prevention.

21. In 1987 and 1988, a series of telephone surveys were commissioned by the then City and New Territories Administration, through the Committee on Education and Publicity on AIDS. Virtually all respondents (n=1003, age 15 to 64) in the pre-campaign survey were aware of AIDS and indicated television and newspapers as the primary source of awareness. A month after the launching (n=1000), awareness of AIDS publicity on TV reached 85%. A third survey (n=1009) conducted a year later reported that two-thirds considered the Government had done enough publicity on AIDS.

22. In 1993, an opinion survey was commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness of APIs. A total of 740 adults above the age of 18 were interviewed by phone, with over 90% claiming that they had seen an AIDS API. A majority (71.7%) had, through the APIs, improved their knowledge on the "spread and precautionary measures on AIDS". About half considered the

messages clear. Nearly a quarter (24.2%) responded that they had changed their behaviours as a result to prevent HIV transmission.

23. In 1998, a TV API titled “Be a responsible man” with the theme of “Prevent STD/HIV, Use Condom” featuring a celebrity Mr Yuen Wah was produced. A telephone survey conducted in March 1999 on 510 respondents showed a recall rate of 65% three months after the launching of the TV API. Eighty-two percent could identify the artist in the API and 60 % interpreted that the API was to promote condom use.

Consolidating the Views of ACA

24. This paper summarises the activities of the Government in enhancing public awareness on AIDS. HIV/AIDS is a dynamic subject carrying wide social implications. Over the last two decades, there have been significant changes in the local and global HIV situation, its impacts, scientific advances and also the responses of the community. Strategies of the past may not necessarily be appropriate to meet current and future needs. Some of the main changes of the AIDS landscape are:

- (a) HIV/AIDS is evolving from a medical myth to a chronic illness
- (b) Antiretroviral treatment is reducing the morbidity and mortality of HIV/AIDS in places where such treatment is accessible and affordable.
- (c) The evidence of HIV prevention through behavioural changes is cumulating. The modification of individual s behaviours is not possible without the creation of an environment supportive of changes.
- (d) Human mobility is one important factor that causes uncertainty in the growth of the epidemic in many places, including Hong Kong and the Mainland.
- (e) The HIV rate in Mainland China is escalating.

25. Against the background portrayed in this paper, the Advisory Council on AIDS examined the strategy of promoting public awareness on AIDS in a meeting held on 19 January 2001. Specifically, members: (a) noted the involvement of the Government in promoting public awareness on AIDS; (b) considered the role of the Government on the promotion of AIDS awareness in the last sixteen years, in context of the community's response and the changing patterns of HIV/AIDS in Hong Kong and internationally; (c) debated on the future strategy that the Government should take on in enhancing public awareness on AIDS.

26. The consensus of the Council can be summarized as follows:

- (a) The early efforts of the Government and the community are commendable. These efforts are believed to have led to the current scenario characterized by a relatively low HIV rate in Hong Kong.
- (b) There is an apparent lack of research to evaluate the level of public awareness, and its correlation with programmatic efforts. This shortcoming could be related to the insufficient interest in the academia, the absence of universally accepted methodology, and the difficulty in unlinking the impacts of different programme components. An emphasis on locally relevant research methodology is recommended, so is the potential of establishing sustainable mechanisms to monitor public awareness, and the option of integrating such efforts with parallel evaluation of other targeted intervention activities.
- (c) A change of publicity strategy is warranted, which should be supported by the Government, and should take into the consideration the changing landscape of HIV/AIDS locally, internationally and the interface with the Mainland. The scare tactic adopted in the early years, though heavily criticized today in perspective, could have served some purposes in the initial phase. These should now be replaced by strategies focusing on prevention and the promotion of acceptance of people living with HIV/AIDS.

- (d) The difficulty in reconciling the complexity of HIV/AIDS in a media campaign is acknowledged. It is noted that that the normalization of HIV/AIDS as a disease condition on one hand and the targeted prevention to be introduced to marginalized communities on the other, are not conflicting ideology.
- (e) A sustained effort in the promotion of public awareness is a crucial component of an effective HIV programme. An expansion of the scope of the current programme is needed. There should be allies in health care professions, grassroot organizations, churches, schools and other community sectors in order to engender a truly positive response to HIV/AIDS.
- (f) The moral standard attached to the issue of AIDS can be disruptive in the development of a cohesive approach in combating the infection in the community. In this connection, programme planners should be aware (i) of the dual benefit of promoting acceptance, that of providing effective care to those infected, and reducing the chance of further spread of the infection through supporting at risk individual to seek assistance; and (ii) that HIV/AIDS is but one of the many conditions the causation of which is contributed by individual risk behaviours. The launching of media campaigns serves to promote awareness as well as foster the development of a supportive environment to achieve behavioural changes, the hallmark of HIV prevention.

Annex I: AIDS APIs on Television

Title (*publicizing a service, publication or an event)	Format S(slide), V(video)	Duration (seconds)	Language C(Chinese), E(English)	Year
*AIDS counselling hotline – <i>publicizing service</i>	S	20/30	C/E	1987
Pyramid	V	30/30	C/E	1987
High risk group	V	30/30	C/E	1987
*AIDS counselling service – <i>publicizing service</i>	S	20/20	C/E	1987
Condom	V	30/30	C/E	1987
Prevention-High Risk Group (Bar)	V	30/30	C/E	1987
*AIDS Counselling Hotline – <i>publicizing service</i>	S	20/30	C/E	1987
*Parents' and Children' s Guide – <i>publicizing publication</i>	S	20/20	C/E	1988
Youth and Prostitution	V	30/30	C/E	1988
Infection of Ordinary People	V	30/30	C/E	1988
*AIDS Exhibition – <i>publicizing an event</i>	S	15/15	C/E	1988
Homosexual	V	30/30	C/E	1989
Sharing Needle	V	30/30	C/E	1989
Safer Sex/Condom	V	30/30	C/E	1990
*AIDS Exhibition ' 90 (City Hall) – <i>publicizing an event</i>	S	20/-	C	1990
*AIDS Exhibition ' 90 (Cultural Centre) – <i>publicizing an event</i>	S	20/-	C	1990
AIDS & Travellers	V	30/30	C/E	1990
Misconception (I) – revised in 1996	V	15/15	C/E	1991
Misconception (II) – revised in 1996	V	15/15	C/E	1991
Misconception (III) – revised in 1996	V	15/15	C/E	1991
Stuntman	V	30/30	C/E	1992
The Use of Condom	V	38/38	C/E	1992
HIV Test Booklet	S	15/15	C/E	1992
Women Protection	V	30/30	C/E	1992
Husband	V	30/30	C/E	1993
Girl	V	30/30	C/E	1993
Three women (Salon)	V	30/30	C/E	1994
Talk About AIDS (Mouth)	V	30/30	C/E	1994
The story of J.J. I – full version	V	60/60	C/E	1995
The story of J.J. II – Prevention	V	30/30	C/E	1995
The Story of J.J. III – Attitudes	V	30/30	C/E	1995
*10 Years of AIDS in Posters – <i>publicizing an event</i>	S	30/30	C/E	1996
Appeal by Celebrity I – Pamela Pak	V	30/30	C/E	1996
Appeal by Celebrity II – Paul Tse	V	30/30	C/E	1996
Appeal by Celebrity III – Li Pik Sum (revised in 1996/97)	V	30/30	C/E	1996
Appeal by Celebrity IV – Hung Chiu Fung	V	30/30	C/E	1996
Appeal by Celebrity V – Gary Ngan	V	30/30	C/E	1996
Be Responsible Use Condom (Yuen Wah)	V	30/30	C/E	1999
Sharing Needle	V	30/30	C/E	2000

Annex II – AIDS APIs on Radio

Title (*publicizing a service, publication or an event)	Language	Year
High Risk Group	C/E	1987
Pyramid	C/E	1987
*AIDS Counselling Service Hotline – <i>publicizing service</i>	C/E	1987
Condom	C/E	1987
*AIDS Hotline – <i>publicizing service</i>	C/E	1988
Parents' and Children's Guide Book	C/E	1988
Youth and Prostitution	C/E	1988
Infection of Ordinary People	C/E	1988
*AIDS Exhibition – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/E	1988
*AIDS Youth Concert I and II – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1988
Sharing Needle	C/E	1989
Safer Sex/Condom	C/E	1990
*AIDS Exhibition '90 (City Hall) – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1990
*AIDS Exhibition '90 (Cultural Centre) – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1990
AIDS & Travellers	C/E	1990
Misconception	C/E	1991
*AIDS Exhibition – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/E	1991/1992
*AIDS Information Line – <i>publicizing service</i>	C/E	1992
*HIV Test Booklet – <i>publicizing publication</i>	C/E	1992
Women Protection	C/E	1992
*AIDS Exhibition '92 – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/E	1992
*Lunar New Year Fair – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1993
*AIDS Concert – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1993
Husband	C/E	1993
Girls	C/E	1993
*Morning Star Traveling Light Exhibition – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1993
*Hong Kong AIDS Week – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/E	1993
*AIDS Exhibition – Homantin – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1994
*AIDS Exhibition – Tuen Mun – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1994
*AIDS Exhibition – Chai Wan – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1994
*AIDS Exhibition – Tsing Yi – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1994
*AIDS Exhibition – Kwun Tong – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/-	1994
Words	C/E	1994
Censored	C/E	1994
Not Just	C/E	1994
*World AIDS Day Exhibition – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/E	1995
*AIDS Poster Exhibition – <i>publicizing an event</i>	C/E	1996
Misconception	C/E	1996
Appeal by Pamela Pak	C/-	1996
Appeal by Pau Tse	C/-	1996
Appeal by Lee Pik Sum	C/-	1996
Appeal by Hung Chiu Fung	C/-	1996
Appeal by Gary Ngan	C/-	1996
Be Responsible Use Condom (Supermarket)	C/E/P	1998
Be Responsible Use Condom (Overseas trip)	C/E/P	1998

About the Advisory Council on AIDS

The Advisory Council on AIDS (ACA) was formed in 1990. It was actually transformed from the Expert Committee on AIDS, which was in existence as early as 1984. The ACA is now in its fourth term (1999-2002).

ACA has the following terms of reference:

- (a) to keep under review local and international trends and development relating to HIV infection and AIDS;
- (b) to advise Government on policy relating to the prevention, care and control of HIV infection and AIDS in Hong Kong; and
- (c) to advise on the co-ordination and monitoring of programmes on the prevention of HIV infection and the provision of services to people with HIV/AIDS in Hong Kong.

Membership

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