

Designing an AIDS Information Campaign to Reach Intravenous Drug Users and Sex Partners

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Synopsis

Intravenous drug users are currently the second largest group to have developed the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in the United States and Europe. Clearly, health communication plays an

important role in the development of AIDS prevention programs directed at IV drug users. However, few public information campaigns have been developed to reach IV drug users or their sexual partners.

In a recent campaign directed at these groups, the selection of messages to be used was based both on theory and on research into multi-media public information campaigns. The attempt was made to communicate basic facts about AIDS etiology and prevention. This included information that needle sharing and unprotected sex could spread the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS, while bleaching needles and using condoms properly could reduce the risk of infection. A step-by-step diagram on how to bleach needles was provided. Posters, pamphlets, billboards, and out-reach workers were used to spread the word in inner-city neighborhoods, and coverage of the campaign was sought in the news media.

Strategies incorporating practical and theory-based suggestions for future campaigns on IV drug use and AIDS are discussed.

A growing number of AIDS public education campaigns are focusing on intravenous (IV) drug users, who constitute the second largest group to have developed the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in the United States and Europe (1). Health communication unquestionably plays an important role in the development of AIDS prevention programs directed at this at-risk group. Although communication campaigns have successfully influenced behaviors ranging from smoking to birth control (2,3), few campaigns have sought to affect the AIDS-related attitudes and behaviors of IV drug users.

Our purpose is to enhance understanding of the role that mass communication plays in the development of AIDS education campaigns by describing a recent campaign directed at IV drug users and their sexual partners and to suggest some strategies that emerged from the campaign.

A Campaign to Reach IV Drug Users

Our first task was to select the target audience and define the campaign objectives. The campaign took place during the summer of 1989 in Cleveland, OH, a city that had at the time 493 diagnosed cases of AIDS (4). Although Cleveland's IV users reside in both the inner city and the suburbs, the campaign's limited \$20,000 budget required us to prioritize our efforts and to focus our energies on the inner-city poor.

Awareness. Our main goal was to promote awareness of the AIDS educational project. In light of evidence suggesting that repeated exposure to names promotes positive feelings (5), we devoted considerable time and energy to coming up with an appropriate name for the project. We finally settled on Project SAFE (Stay AIDS Free through Educa-

tion) because it captured our thematic approach and allowed us to use a short acronym.

Knowledge. We wanted to communicate certain basic facts about AIDS etiology and prevention to IV drug users. Specifically, we sought to (a) inform IV drug users that needle sharing and unprotected sex could spread the HIV, (b) let them know that there were actions they could take to reduce their risk of getting AIDS, (c) show them how to clean the IV apparatus effectively and how to put on a condom, (d) describe the benefits of being tested for the virus, and (e) provide them with yet another motivation to get into drug treatment. We also wanted to inform the sexual partners of IV drug users that HIV can be transmitted to an unborn baby, so we provided information regarding techniques for practicing safer sex.

Action. In light of the abundant evidence that communications do not change strongly held attitudes (6), we did not expect that our messages would convince IV drug users to quit injecting drugs and enter treatment. A more reasonable objective was to motivate people to seek information. Convincing them to call the Project SAFE hotline was regarded as a reasonable behavioral objective.

Having selected the goals, we then moved to choose messages that would be transmitted through various communication channels to our target audiences.

Messages. Communications directed at IV drug users emphasized that shooting drugs put people at risk of HIV infection. Messages also described preventive strategies, such as using bleach to clean needles. A step-by-step diagram on how to bleach needles was provided. Sex partners were provided explicit instructions on how to use a condom. We also used a black and white poster that displayed a tombstone with the inscription: "Don't Share a Bed With Someone Who Shares a Needle."

Communication channels. Given our limited budget, the cost of television advertising was prohibitive. Instead, we focused on smaller "micro-media" channels such as posters, pamphlets, and billboards. Outreach helpers spread the word in inner-city neighborhoods.

Posters, featuring the "Don't Share a Bed with Someone who Shares a Needle" message, were placed in inner-city business places and on conveyances of the rapid transit system. Billboards displayed the poster in inner city residential areas.

Brochures were distributed to people on the streets.

We also launched a campaign to garner publicity in the news media. We contacted the mayor's office to suggest that the city declare the last week in July as Drugs/Aids Awareness Week. Several candidates for mayor were eager to support the proclamation of a special week because a commitment to stop the spread of AIDS was a position with which few could disagree. Ultimately, we secured proclamations from the mayor and from the Cuyahoga County Commissioners. Press kits that described the entire campaign were sent to local newspapers and broadcast stations.

Outreach workers were dispatched to inner-city residential areas and to local businesses to answer questions and hand out brochures and condoms. All handouts had the Project SAFE name and hotline telephone number prominently displayed.

The local news media provided some coverage of the information campaign. On the second day of the campaign, the city's daily newspaper ran a front page article on our outreach activity in inner-city neighborhoods; an article describing the telephone hotline appeared on the health page inside the paper. Two weekly newspapers ran articles based on the general press release. Several local radio stations broadcast news stories on Drugs/AIDS Awareness Week.

Practical Suggestions

Groups devising an AIDS media campaign should expect to encounter several practical problems and dilemmas. Based on our experiences in this arena and on the research literature on persuasive communication, we offer the following suggestions:

Understand a city's political dynamics. During the planning stages of our campaign, we learned that employees of a California community agency had come up with a clever way of capturing IV drug users' attention. A staff member from the agency would tour at-risk areas dressed up in a "Superman"-type costume. He called himself "Bleachman," and his message was that IV drug users should use bleach to clean their needles. His campaign had reportedly attracted media attention in several cities.

When we suggested this idea to drug board and urban health officials in our own city, we were told that this would cause political problems. With the fall election a few months away, drug board officials feared that local candidates would use this

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issue as a way to stir up controversy. They suspected that politicians would seize the opportunity to suggest that passing out free bleach was tantamount to encouraging increased needle and drug use.

Bear in mind the needs of the news media. We were able to obtain news coverage of our project by supplying "angles" on the story that fit the needs of local news agencies. We recognized that newspapers and broadcast stations would view our project as "just another AIDS story" unless they were provided with an interesting news "peg," an unusual aspect to the story that they could hang their coverage on. Linking AIDS Awareness Week with the opening of our counseling office provided reporters with a fresh local angle on the AIDS story.

Similarly, inviting reporters to accompany outreach workers as they passed out free condoms generated an interesting news feature. We quickly learned, however, that the local news media have little interest in AIDS-IV drug use stories. Local broadcast stations were not interested in running news stories on the subject, in large part (we suspect) because they viewed the issue as impacting only a small and rather deviant minority. The lesson is clear: those who are planning AIDS information campaigns need to appreciate the needs that drive the print and broadcast media. Given the premium placed on programming that can attract a large audience, campaign specialists might seek to design messages that are both captivating and entertaining (7).

Select communication channels wisely. Given our limited budget, we could not afford to purchase television advertisements. Instead, we opted for posters, pamphlets, and a neighborhood outreach campaign. These avenues of communication may be more appropriate than television for reaching IV drug users anyway, since IV drug users may not watch much TV or may not pay much attention to televised public service announcements. On a more general level, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that "bigger is better" in terms of reaching the

public. Ultimately, the decision as to which method is most appropriate depends on the nature of the target audience, as well as on budgetary factors.

Theory-Based Suggestions

Information-prevention campaigns are most likely to succeed if they are based on theory and research findings. Studies of persuasion and of information campaigns suggest several general strategies for developing AIDS campaigns directed at IV drug users. We have organized these in terms of the basic "who (source) says what (message) through which modality (channel)" model of persuasion.

Source factors. AIDS campaigns are more likely to succeed to the extent that they select communicators who are perceived as credible by the target audience. Selecting credible campaign spokespersons requires extensive polling of IV drug users in the target city to determine the qualities they find credible and appealing in a communicator. For example, celebrity movie stars are commonly used in many public information campaigns, but they may be a liability for campaigns directed at a group that distrusts the larger society. Sources who are seen as "insiders" may be a better choice. Des Jarlais and Friedman (1) reported that the strongest predictor of behavior change among IV drug users was the belief that their friends were changing their behavior. This suggests that peers may function as effective campaign spokespersons. One might also consider using as sources IV drug users who formerly shared needles but now use bleach to clean needles or IV drug users who have come in for treatment, inasmuch as these communicators may possess added persuasive influence.

Message factors. Most communications directed at IV drug users try to arouse fear. Fear is a complex weapon in the health arena, however. Although research indicates that high fear appeals are generally more effective than low fear messages (8), it is naive to assume that one can motivate IV drug users to change their behavior by the use of simple scare tactics. Social psychological studies have found that arousing fear is not in itself sufficient to change problematic behaviors; rather, messages must convince people to take the necessary precautions to protect themselves from danger (9).

Specifically, recent research on the psychology of fear suggests that persuasive communications should contain four components (9). They should

contain information about the magnitude or noxiousness of the problem, explain that there is a high probability that negative consequences will afflict people if they do not change their behaviors, outline an action plan to show how these consequences can be reversed, and explain that the person is fully capable of undertaking these behaviors.

Applied to the AIDS-IV drug use context, this line of research suggests that senders of campaign messages should make certain that they

- describe graphically the deadly nature of AIDS,
- explain that IV drug users—particularly those in the target group’s geographic locale—are at risk to get AIDS,
- explain specifically how IV drug users can reduce their risks of contracting the virus, such as by showing how to use bleach to clean needles, and
- emphasize that IV drug users are personally capable of performing these corrective behaviors.

A recent study discovered that more than two-thirds of the brochures directed at IV drug users did not make the point that IV drug users were psychologically capable of changing their drug injection and sexual behaviors (10). Messages should try to include such “self-efficacy information” as well as the types of personal and emotional connections with IV drug users that will promote more long-term behavioral changes.

Channel factors. It is important to select communication channels that reach the target audience. Focus groups should be employed to determine which channels—print, radio, television, or a combination—IV drug users rely on and which programs they watch. It is also important to supplement mass media with interpersonal channels. Communication campaigns are more likely to succeed to the extent that they combine media messages with interpersonal communication, for example, using outreach workers to disseminate the messages in target neighborhoods (11). Interpersonal communication can reinforce the message, and it can help provide

the kind of social support that is needed to produce long-term changes in at-risk behaviors.

With the number of AIDS cases rising among IV drug users, it is likely that we will see an increase in the number of information campaigns directed at this target group. Our experience suggests that it is important to combine mass media and interpersonal channels of influence. In addition, planners should take into account the political dynamics of the particular urban area and the needs of the local media.

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