

OU professor Arvind Singhal reads a passage from his book, "Combatting AIDS: Communication Strategies in Action," during his talk at the Athens Rotary Club last Monday. Photo by Ed Venrick.



Speaker: Education, communication key to slowing spread of AIDS

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With no vaccine yet available for AIDS, the best defense against the fatal disease remains education and communication.

That was the message from Arvind Singhal, an Ohio University professor of interpersonal communications who spoke to the Athens Rotary Club last Monday. Singhal has studied AIDS around the world and has written four books and numerous articles on the subject.

Across the globe, 25 million people have AIDS and 40 million more are infected with HIV, Singhal said. The disease has already claimed more lives than the Black Plague and it continues to spread.

In doing his research, Singhal studied areas of the world where AIDS cases have decreased. He has looked at why the numbers are coming down in certain places and why they continue to rise in others.

With no vaccine to cure the disease, the numbers are decreasing in some countries because people are understanding how to prevent it, Singhal said. The main issue facing government and health leaders is how to best get that message across, Singhal said.

"HIV and AIDS represent the mother of all communications challenges," Singhal said. Discussion of the issue involves sex, morality and social issues that are not often discussed in some cultures, he said.

In Uganda, where the government and health officials are making an effort to tell people how they can stop the spread of AIDS, the percentage of people with AIDS is declining, Singhal said.

In South Africa, though, where the president of the country has stated that HIV does

not lead to AIDS, the AIDS problem is growing, Singhal said.

One contrast is presented in the Indian cities of Calcutta and Bombay, he added. Both cities have large numbers of people working in sexually-oriented businesses.

In 1986 in Bombay, only about 1 percent of the people working in the sex businesses had HIV, Singhal said. By 1993, the number had grown to 45 percent, and last year it had increased to 70 percent, he said.

In Calcutta, only about 1 percent of the workers in the sex business had HIV in 1986, Singhal said. In 1993, though, the figure had only gone up to 2 percent, and in 2002 it was still at 2 percent, he said.

The big difference between the two cities is that in Bombay the workers in the sex industries are exploited and in Calcutta they are unionized, Singhal said. The workers in Bombay have little control over their work and they are apparently not taking precautions against becoming infected with HIV, he added.

In Calcutta, though, the unionized workers know how to prevent catching HIV, they receive health screenings and they are more in control of their work, Singhal said.

Singhal also related the story of a small community in Brazil where a local padre had set up a hospice facility with children and adults with AIDS. At first, the community rejected the idea of having a hospice in the town because of the stigma associate with AIDS, Singhal said. As a result, he added, the people made the padre move the AIDS hospice to the outskirts of the city.

Soon after, a child in the community became sick with a liver problem and the community raised \$30,000 to send her to

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America to be treated, he said. Before she could go to America, she died and the community still had the \$30,000. The community leaders decided to create a facility in the town to house children with AIDS, he said.

The people in the town took care of the children, visiting them and playing with them, according to Singhal.

"They became the community's children," he said. The children tore down some of the stigmas about AIDS and the people in the community became more accepting of people with

the disease, Singhal said.

Eliminating the stigma and getting people talking about HIV and AIDS is the best way to prevent the disease, he said.

Leaders around the world are challenged with finding the best way to do this, and Singhal is doing his part to help through his research and publications.

Singhal's latest book is "Combatting AIDS Communication Strategies in Action." He has worked with the U.S. State Department as well as the Centers for Disease Control in researching AIDS-related topics.

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