

# 'Make a very loud shout'

*Sahara Times Dec. 4, 2004. p. 9*

## INTERVIEW

### ARVIND SINGHAL



**A**RVIND SINGHAL is a research scholar and professor in the school of Interpersonal Communication, College of Communication, Ohio University. He is the co-author (with Professor Everett M Rogers) of the book *Combating AIDS-Communication Strategies in Action*. The book has won several awards. In a recently held workshop on AIDS at Kolkata, he had a candid conversation with Sujoy Dhar. Excerpts:

**Q. What is your latest book on communication strategies for AIDS all about?**

A. The book is about what role communication can play in preventing the disease. If one is talking about a vaccine, we know there is no therapeutic or preventive vaccine. But it is a disease that can be prevented. So how it can be prevented? It is only through education and communication. The latter has a very important role to play in educating people about the modes of transmission and also motivating them to adopt certain behaviour and lifestyles which would prevent them from being vulnerable to HIV.

*social groups like sex workers and sexual minority and the majority of the "normal" people when it comes to communication and interaction between the two. The behaviour and lifestyle of the sex workers or say a section of gay minority as perceived by the mainstream people lead to a "them Vs us" situation which can work against the fight against the disease.*

are "other" because you are not like us. I think communication has a very good role to play in breaking the silence, in correcting the perception that those people who get HIV get through heterosexual sex or mother-child transmission. They are not to be blamed.

**Q. How do you rate the awareness initiative in India?**

A. There is a high level awareness. Everybody has heard about it and we hope that awareness is translated into appropriate knowledge or effective and appropriate action. But India still has a very long way to go. In a country like Uganda, there is tremendous amount of concern and accurate knowledge among the people coupled with action while in India it is still "not my problem" attitude that pervades. Within 5 to 10 years each of us would know somebody who is HIV positive. Close friend or may be a family member.

**Q. There is still a lot of confusion about the nature of the virus.**

A. I think the fact about how HIV is transmitted has not changed very much since the early days. I think the basic fact still remains the same like exchange of bodily fluid or through contaminated blood through supply of blood or needle sharing. What we needed that the policy makers, the Prime Minister, the Chief Ministers, and all should begin to realize

**Q. The word AIDS since it was coined has been associated with social stigma. Does your book deal with this issue?**

A. I understand that we are dealing with issues like stigma. Stigma is how one person treats the other. I remember meeting Ashok Pillay, the founder of Indian National Network of Positive People a few weeks before he passed away and he told me that stigma is like living death. Because you are dying every moment. People are killing you by their looks, people are killing you by their words and people are killing you by their silence. So it is how we communicate with the others determines how we stigmatise. So this book really is about role of communication in prevention, the role of communication in overcoming stigma and the role of communication with care and support.

**Q. Till today there is a huge gulf between the HIV prone**

and the right society and education.

A. You, know this is a very important point. When HIV surfaced in the United States, by a strange stroke of coincidence it was seen first among the gay homosexuals. This was a group that was already stigmatised to begin with. Even in the US and everywhere in the world. So when HIV came into the gay community and it led to death in thousands, you can say that it took on a double stigma. You are gay to begin with and then you are HIV positive or AIDS patient. In fact it was initially called Gay related immune deficiency virus. It was rather unfortunate that it happened that way. However, if you look at the epidemiological landscape of the AIDS, at the present time there are more women who are HIV positive than there are men. Most of these women are not commercial sex workers or intravenous drug users. Most of the children who are becoming HIV are not the so called vulnerable group. So see the stigma which was restricted to these groups has been transferred to those who are quote unquote innocent. Although why should we say that others are not innocent. The commercial sex worker in Sonagachi or Kennedy Park in Mumbai are innocent too. They are poor, they are there not because they wanted to be there but because they were being traded. And they are there because their brothel madams want them to pay off certain loans, so in very young age they have to cater twenty times a day. They are forced and raped, often by the mafia and the police. So even to say that they are in some way deserving is so unfortunate. So it rather a bad tale about humanity that we "otherise" some people. It is unfortunate that we tell some people that you

and mobilize the civil society into doing things that would translate into action. General Museveni, President of Uganda for last 18 years, was asked how he did it in his country. He said in a very colloquial way that when a lion comes to a village and it is killing you are most vulnerable, then you don't make a small shout. You shout loudly. So when you are faced with a real danger you make a very loud shout and you shout and shout and

shout. The imam, the headmaster in the school, the captain of a soccer team and the parents in a home-all should shout to fight the menace.

**Q. India is a developing nation but not a banana republic like many African countries. It is a democratic nation with a vibrant educated middle class. Do you think the plurality in our society can be a bane for a rather crude HIV/AIDS campaign?**

**‘What we needed that the policy makers, the Prime Minister, the Chief Ministers, and all should begin to realize and mobilize the civil society into doing things that would translate into action’**

A. I think the shouting is same everywhere. HIV/AIDS is something we don't want to talk about. So here the village chief is very important person to spread the message. Cambodia with such debilitating history of Pol Pot and others was nowhere five years back so far fighting the menace of AIDS is concerned but today they are an upcoming success story. So how that happened? The deputy minister of health in that country took the Prime Minister to a hostel of HIV/AIDS patients. So, he experienced it first hand and from the next day the national response completely changed. And he pushed and put into place so many different programmes and it resulted in a success story. So all should begin to shout- from the ground to the top. ■

# Combating AIDS

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN ACTION

ARVIND SINGHAL  
EVERETT M ROGERS