Pandemics – from HIV/AIDS to COVID-19: why media reports matter

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Inside The Newsroom

- Sorting through a vast amount of information quickly
- There is official news – briefings etc.
- Or it may just be one’s sources giving information
- Everything needs to be verified within deadline
- Don’t want to cause panic, yet convey accurate information
Revisiting the Plague outbreak in India -1994

Bubonic Plague Outbreak in India in 1994, hit international headlines.

Government did not give us the information. But helped confirm it.

Scientists pitched in to provide accurate information.
That’s not all...

- Tell the stories of losses – go to grieving families, go to funeral homes
- 24x7 news pressure and do not forget, social media.
- Often there may be only one or two reporters to do it all.
- Journalists too have fears...
Covering HIV... day after day

- It wasn’t visible and many didn’t believe
- Issues about morality
- People dismissed it as a “western conspiracy” or just a disease of the west.
- Or it was a disease of sex workers, gay people – constant othering
- There was a restriction on immigration and travel to the United States for non-U.S. citizens living with HIV -- from 1987 to 2010.
Challenges back then

- Misinformation was quick to travel, rumors abounded
- There was a lot of mistrust – of information.
- Stigma– certain groups became targets of violence.
- The marginalized, the vulnerable groups were most affected.
- Issues regarding access to drugs
- The politics of it all – funding, resources
- Society was so divided...

Sounds familiar???
Role of Media

- To make it visible
- To counter misinformation
- To break the silence around it
- Dealing with resistance at every level
- Editors not interested in a story that is all about death and dying
- Finding the story
The Story of Ashok

• He was a young naval officer

• He helped people see it was everyone’s issue

• He also gave hope

From a sentence of death, he showed one could live with HIV
HIV exposed so many cracks in society

- Gender issues
- Vulnerable groups
- Sex industry
- Stigma – People were lynched
- Silence and Isolation
- Powerful drug lobbies
Role of religion

• I came across stories of how poor girls were sold into brothels and once infected, they were dumped on the streets, with no place to go to.

• I talked to women, who were pushed into the sex trade as part of a tradition of devdaasis, going back to the 7th century, when some women were married to the Gods.

• These days the women are left to earn their livelihood through sex work and often set out from their villages to a big city like Mumbai for better earnings.

• Some faith leaders became partners in prevention, but there were those who looked at it as a moral issue.
Impact of Media Reporting

Created awareness

Then President of India, Abdul Kalam, visited a center after a story – it helped with treatment, acceptance and getting resources.
Public opinion and AIDS drugs

- People in wealthier countries had access to drugs which cost around $10,000 to $15,000 a year.

- Breakthrough came with an Indian company Cipla making the generic version drugs and offering them for US$350 a year per patient to Doctors Without Borders – and it wasn’t sued.
On AIDS Drugs

• Dr Yusuf Hamied, the chairman of Cipla was asked at the time what he would do if the three drug companies sued to stop him, and he said:

• "We won't fight it. I don't look at it as a fight. There's room for everybody. This is a holocaust in Africa. It's like the earthquake in India right now -- everybody is helping out. I'm not looking to pick anybody's business; there's room for the multinationals at their price and room for us at our price, a partnership."
India’s Health Challenges

• Huge disparities in health care

• Enormous burden of non-communicable and communicable diseases. India has the highest TB burden in the world.

• Childhood deaths and malnutrition.
For Profit hospitals

For-profit private healthcare sector, accounts for around 75% of outpatient care.
Covering social, cultural, religious issues

Lasik leaves girl partially blind – Times of India, May, 2003

New Delhi: If you’re going in for Lasik, make sure your in competent hands. A 22-year-old girl lost a large part of the cornea of one of her eyes to a post-Lasik infection. A subsequent graft has replaced only 40 per cent of her vision.

Doctors at the Rajendra Prasad Ophthalmic Centre at AIIMS are not too sure about the long-term results. “There are chances of rejection in this patient as it is a large graft,” says additional professor at the centre, Dr J S Titiyal. “As of now, the future of this eye looks bleak.”

The girl came to AIIMS in March this year from Guwahati, where the Lasik surgery had been performed. Eye specialists at AIIMS found a severe fungal infection under the flap that is lifted during surgery to slice off a part of the cornea for vision correction.

“We had to remove the entire infected area, clean it as it was full of pus and replace it with a large graft. She has lost around 60 per cent of her vision,” Titiyal says.

Chairman, scientific committee, Intraocular Implant and Refractive Society of India, Dr Mahipal Sachdeva, points out that like any other surgical procedure, Lasik too has a risk of infection. The rate of infection varies between one in 1,000 and one in 4,000. But, he adds, this surgery is safe as the laser beam itself has a sterilising effect.

The specialists at AIIMS say the infection could be the result of the conditions in the operating theatre, which may not have been entirely aseptic.

“If she had come to us, we would not have performed Lasik on her,” says professor at the OP Centre, Dr R B Vajpayee. He emphasises the “importance of pre-operative screening and proper case selection for this procedure to be successful and retain its good name”.

The safety of Lasik had snowballed into a major controversy following a series of reports in The Times of India on its complications as it was being marketed as a safe procedure till then.
Other Health Issues

Banned Drugs:

Vioxx, known as Rofecoxib, was voluntarily withdrawn from the U.S. market due to adverse effects.

Other disease outbreaks:
SARS coverage in 2003
COVID is adding another stress
Covid is not just health, but a religion story -- Mahakumbh mela in India
Tablighi Jamaat Members Arrested

In March 2020, members of a Muslim group arrested for spreading COVID.
What it takes for the media to report...

- Dedicated reporters, who can do this day after day.

- Takes building of a lot of trust with sources, for people to share their stories

- Taking on pressure from powerful groups – politicians, pharmaceutical companies.

- Countering misinformation without bringing opinion and judgment.

- Vaccine politics – 90% or 75%

- Being aware that health involves cultural, social, economic, religious issues.

A health system needs reliable eyes and ears, Times of India
When the pandemic ends..

- Child deaths
- Health system overstressed
- Poverty
- Immunisation programs
- Maternal mortality
- Livelihoods... hunger...
What it needs from the public?