

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

Kalpana Jain

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.

The image shows the front page of The Times of India newspaper. The masthead at the top reads "THE TIMES OF INDIA" in large, bold, serif capital letters, with "BENNETT, COLEMAN & CO., LTD." underneath. Below the masthead, the date and issue information are printed: "NO. 216, VOL. CLXVI • NEW DELHI, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 1994 • CAPITAL • 20 • 2 Capital pages • Today's newsstand price: Rs. 1.50 • Home delivery for September Rs. 52".

The main headline, in a large, bold, serif font, reads: "Four persons test positive for plague near Latur".

Below the headline, the byline reads: "By KALPANA JAIN and SUBHASH KIRPEKAR".

The article text begins: "The Times of India News Service NEW DELHI, September 14. Four persons have tested positive for plague, in Bhi, a district headquarters 350 km south of Pune. All residents of this area have been given antibiotics to prevent further spread of the disease. A team of medical scientists from the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) which is visiting the area is expected back with more samples shortly. No deaths, however, have been reported. Mr M. S. Deyal, Union health secretary while confirming the information said 'a few cases have been noticed. But a more detailed report is awaited'. The Maharashtra chief minister, Mr Sharad Pawar when contacted over the telephone at his Bombay residence said, 'I am hearing this for the first time. I will require and get back to you'. Efforts to trace Lok Sabha Speaker Shri P. V. Narayan Rao who represents the area in Parliament proved futile. He had left for Pune by the evening flight and an official at the Circuit House there said that he was 'proceeding to Kolhapur straight from the airport'. He was not aware if Mr Pawar would visit Bhi which is barely 125 kilometres from Latur where a major earthquake had left thousands, homeless besides claiming innumerable lives. A team of scientists from the Plague Surveillance Unit at Bangalore is collecting more samples in this area. Officials here said there have been no deaths. The four infected persons have been given antibiotic therapy. The unit coordinates the activities of plague control units in three states which are considered to be endemic. The states are Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The Central Plague Laboratory is at the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, New Delhi. The last case of plague infection in humans was reported in India in 1966 from Mulbagal taluka of Kolar district in Karnataka, outbreaks suspected to be of plague have occurred in different parts, but from none of them, the rat flea which causes the disease, could be isolated. Suspected plague cases have occurred in Himachal Pradesh, Bihar and South India, including of Tamil Nadu, suspected cases of plague occurred in May, 1984 in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Of these two died and a girl recovered with antibiotics. In the Himachal region, plague epidemics have been recorded during the late fifties and the early sixties. In 1972 plague bacillus could be isolated from the rodents in this area. In a booklet on plague, two senior scientists, Dr Saraljit Singh and Dr Rajesh Bhatia, say that the symptoms are: fever, chills, weakness and headache. After a few hours or the next day, a swelling may be seen in the lymph nodes. The regions affected are the axilla, groin and the neck. The swelling is known as a bubo. It is oval and one to 10 cms in length. They are mostly seen in the groin, the scientists say. The plague bacillus initially comes in a flea from a rat. The symptoms come usually two to six days after being bitten by a rat flea. Despite the intensive activities undertaken to control plague worldwide, the infection seems to be present in several areas. During the last decade 6,433 cases of plague were reported from all over the world. Of these, 720 had died. The countries that reported the largest number of cases of plague in humans in the eighties were Tanzania, Vietnam, Brazil and Peru. In India the brunt of the disease was felt during its third pandemic. More than 12.5 million people died during 1898-1918. The third pandemic started in 1860 in China. It was carried by ship to India, Japan, Turkey and European Russia in 1856. The following year it reached Madagascar and Mauritius.

On the right side of the page, there is a small advertisement for "CITIBANK CARDS" with the text "Just call 371-2484." and a logo for "CITIBANK CARDS".

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...

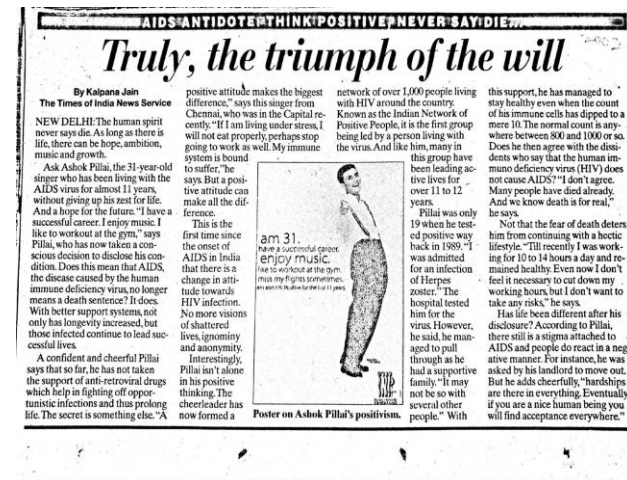
Sounds familiar???

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



Lasik leaves girl partially blind

By Kalpana Jain
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: If you're going in for Lasik, make sure you're 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 re-infection 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 RP 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.

Visible danger

- A 22-yr-old girl lost a large part of her cornea to the infection
- She was operated upon in Guwahati and came to AIIMS in March this year
- The girl had hyper thyroidism, a condition in which Lasik is not allowed

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

Vioxx is banned in India, finally Govt Accepts Expert Committee's Advice Against Painkiller

By Kalpana Jain/TNN

New Delhi: Despite pressures from the pharma industry, the government on Monday accepted an expert group's recommendation that popular painkiller Rofecoxib should be banned.

The expert group meeting was called hastily after TOI reported that the government had not yet taken any action even though globally, patients were being advised against using the drug. Pharmaceutical company Merck withdrew the

drug, commonly known as Vioxx in the US, following damning evidence that it can cause heart attacks and strokes. But Indian pharmaceutical companies had refused to withdraw the drug, taking the plea that there was no ban by the US Food and Drug Administration.

**TIMES
IMPACT**

The fact that Merck had done so despite the drug being a blockbuster (with sales crossing \$2.5 billion) in the interest of consumer safety was overlooked. In fact, scientists are now questioning why

ALSO UNDER SCANNER

Another painkiller in category of COX-2 inhibitors, such as Celecoxib. Easier on stomach than traditional painkillers

Statutory warning: Experts say drug should carry warning it shouldn't be used by those with cardiovascular diseases

Brand names
Celecoxib, Celemax, Celebra, Celebra and Zylcel

it wasn't done earlier. In India, the drug sells under popular brand names such as Rofib, Rofibax, Rofib and Torox. These drugs are pre-

scribed as painkillers. The meeting was attended by top professionals from various medical colleges and government officials. Director-general of

health services S P Aggarwal chaired the meeting. There were pressures from the industry to allow the drug for short-term use, but the experts did not agree. Ranbaxy, for instance, had said earlier as it would advise physicians to prescribe Rofibax only for short-term use. Drug companies here have been taking this plea as trial showed it was only after 1 month that heart rate suddenly increased. However, officials said that with no regulator framework in place in India, it would be difficult to monitor use.

SARS is here to stay, but no need to panic

By Kalpana Jain
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Now that the common cold virus has surfaced in a virulent form as SARS, it will not leave the environment. Just like influenza, which first struck in 1918, people need to learn to deal with it.

"SARS will spread. We cannot avoid it. As time passes, the mortality will come down," says emeritus medical scientist and former director of the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, Dr K K Datta.

"People should not panic, but report to a hospital if they have any symptoms," he says.

Pneumonia kills several thousand people a year. In 2000, 1.3 million people in the US were admitted to hospitals with pneumonia, of whom about 64,000 died.

Globally, an estimated four million children die every year due to respiratory tract infections, with a majority being reported from India. Tuberculosis alone claims over 1,000 lives every day in India.

But as far as SARS is con-

cerned, there are still gaps in knowledge about it and, hence the scare. But, till now, only 3 per cent of the infected have developed the acute form of the disease.

"There is nothing like an infected or an affected country anymore. It's just that some have reported and some have not," says Datta. Not all, who come in close contact with SARS patients, will not develop clinical symptoms of the disease. Eventually, there will be few benefits in putting suspected people through home quarantine, says Datta.

Experts caution that the diagnostic tests are not "foolproof". "The disease is as contagious as an open tuberculosis case," says K K Aggarwal of the Indian Medical Association.

SARS is nowhere close to the first known pandemic caused by a mutant virus that the world suffered — the 'Spanish flu' of 1918 which killed over 20 million people. This deadly influenza originated from pigs and was spread by soldiers during World War I.

Two other mutant forms of the flu virus that have

travelled all over the world since 1918 are the Asian flu of 1957 and the Hong Kong flu of 1968. Both these viruses, too, are known to have mutated in pigs.

Comment: Despite the Central health ministry's assurances that the medical systems are in full alert to meet the SARS emergency, the example, first of Bhopal and now of Kolkata, show that this is far from the case. An action plan should be detailed by the Centre and circulated to all state capitals for dissemination further down the line.

Covid is not just health, but a religion story -- Mahakumbh mela in India



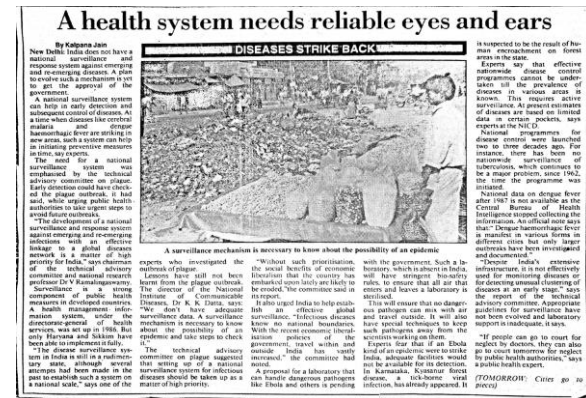
Tablighi Jamaat Members Arrested

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?