

## Media needs to stop sitting on the sidelines

I am not a person for platforms. I prefer to be the one behind the notebook and pen trying to make sense of the world and all its madness. But I feel passionate enough about the topic to put myself through this stressful experience!

The brief of this panel was to chat about the ARV roll-out, the much disputed figures of 53 000 referring to the number of people Government said would be on ARVs by the end of the month, the challenges facing Government in rolling out their plan, the perceived lack of political will versus the real problems they may be facing with implementation, the consequences of the delay and the role the media have to play in all of this.

Most of the above I left to my fellow panelists to deal with and I will try to share my thoughts on my experiences in covering this epidemic over the past few years.

53 000. A figure that has become a symbol for whether we are succeeding in dealing with this epidemic or not. It is a significant figure because if we achieve in placing 53 000 people on ARVs, it would be a world first.

It could have been another record in terms of the Aids epidemic that we can add to the list of having the highest number of People living with HIV/Aids and the largest prevention of mother to child transmission programme in the world..

I am not a member of the roll-out choir in that I do not believe it is the ultimate solution. Obviously I do believe in the merits of providing ARVs to those people who need it, in areas where they are ready to provide it, to a community that is ready to accept it and our track record at Health-e bares testimony to this.

I believe ARVs should be the cherry on top of a programme that deals with among others prevention, keeping people who are HIV positive healthy until they have no other option, but to use the drugs and to make sure they have followed a process which empowers them to not default on their medication.

It is critical that people are encouraged to have themselves tested, to know their HIV status and in this regard I believe it is critical that ARVs are one of the options available to them. I kind of drawcard.

South Africa's plan to contain the epidemic is praised as one of the best in the world, but it appears (from my experience) that those who hold the power as to whether it will succeed or fail are the managers at provincial level – many who are overwhelmed, not up to the task and inexperienced in dealing with such a highly politicized disease.

But a concern is whether these managers are able to prioritise HIV/AIDS without compromising other health issues such as TB, mental health and the immunization programme.

As a journalist I often ask myself what my role is in the epidemic. I often find myself in conversations with colleagues about what we should be doing, what we should be writing, not be writing and so on.

Also, the discussions often centre around a sense of being overwhelmed by so much pain, suffering and hopelessness, especially when we return from the more rural areas, areas that are mostly under reported by the media, with a few exceptions.

I am privileged to be working within an organization where we are given the time and resources to travel to these areas and to tell the stories of so many people who feel they have been forgotten. People for whom a simple trip to the clinic could mean having to use the bread money to catch a taxi - leave before daybreak and return at night or the following day.

At Health-e we are also in a unique position in that we are slightly removed from the hustle and bustle and politics of the newsrooms although we are often reminded that we are part of the bigger machine when we interact with our colleagues while trying to place our work with the newspapers and magazines.

We are often asked to produce less “Aids stories”, told that readers are “tired of reading about Aids” and so on. One needs to ask yourself if this means that you should no longer write about the epidemic.

On the other hand I do not see a letting up in reporting on crime, rugby, the weather, our deputy-president, Patricia Lewis and so on.

Yes, I know the age-old reasoning that Patricia Lewis will sell more newspapers, but do we not need to be the conscience of society? Should we not let these reasons be a motivation to find new and innovative ways to report on the epidemic.

Is it also not shortsighted to fail to see that Aids is part of everything – Aids has place on the finance beat, on the environmental beat, in the education beat, in the crime beat and so on.

No longer reporting on it or letting up should quite frankly not be an option.

Another challenge is that once the journalist decides to focus on a specific story it still has to pass via many computer screens before the final products ends up in the newspaper.

Many times it is spiked, other times it is sensationalized and often it receives an unrecognizable headline.

These decisions are mostly made by people who live in ivory towers, very far removed from the epidemic. It would be interesting to guage how many of these decisionmakers have been to Khayelitsha to see 600 patients waiting on a daily basis to receive their TB treatment, many of them HIV positive.

I wonder how many of them have been to Radoo in the far Northern Province, where they will come across Maria, a 13 year-old cares for her two young brothers while her parents and baby sister lie buried in the backyard.

One cannot come away unaffected.

But we all know this is an age old problem. However, I do believe and it has been proven in the past, that unless these decisionmakers are themselves personally touched by the epidemic it will remain another disease that only deserves space if it is controversial or sensational.

I do not think there has been much introspection on what the role of the very powerful mainstream media should/can be in curbing this epidemic.

We need to interrogate and debate what our role is in this epidemic and how we can contribute.

Why have we not yet established a journalist's forum? Colleagues in Nigeria, Kenya and even a small country such as Gambia have long ago established aids journalist forums where they debate these issues, support one another, share information, and so on. For them, Aids is no longer a precious beat that is merely one of the topics the health reporter has to cover.

I started as a health reporter around 1997 and can honestly say that it has become increasingly challenging to remain motivated and driven to report on an epidemic that is causing untold pain and suffering in communities. One often feels overwhelmed and like a lone voice. I know this is not so and sharing could lighten the load, but somehow we never manage to get it together.

Returning to the issue of the roll-out. I think we are going to face many problems and hurdles and responsible, informed reporting on the issues could be the difference between life and death.

As it is we are struggling to contain and treat diseases and conditions such as TB, hypertension and diabetes...all conditions where the drugs often exhibit complicated side-effects, where the drugs need to be taken every day and often with food.

Yet, we have not even come to grips with treating these manageable or curable diseases.

We have to admit that Aids was a cruel blow as we were still celebrating our new found freedom and democracy. It is perhaps human to have been in denial for some time as we savoured our freedom. But there is no excuse for any further complacency.

Perhaps one of the critical roles of the media is to contextualize matters. To try to sketch the bigger picture. To not only present a hopeless, negative picture, or a hysterical scenario that achieves nothing, but to actively seek out ways in which South Africans can make contributions.

To praise where praise is due, to offer encouragement, to be critical where it is due, but to always remain responsible.

It is also about giving the voiceless a voice. It is about seeking out those people who have incredible stories to tell – some of hope, some of pain, some of death, some of heartache, some of unthinkable poverty, some of joy.

We need to listen to the voice that keeps warning against AIDS fatigue among our readers, but we cannot allow it to stop us. We need to continue challenging ourselves to find new, innovative, inspiring, interesting ways to speak to South Africans about this epidemic. We cannot allow despondency to take over. We owe it to this country to do our bit.

Already this epidemic has seen unprecedented behaviour and actions from all sides.

It has seen an ex-president, a huge statesman admit that his only surviving son has died of an Aids-related disease.

It has seen a Zulu chief talk about the pain of losing children in the prime of their lives.

It has seen a little boy to stand on a world stage and call for newborn babies to be given a life-saving drug, even though it was too late to save his life.

It has seen a civil society organization fighting for access to drugs being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Perhaps it now needs to see a Government saying – Yes, we are overwhelmed. Yes, we have challenges. Yes, we are struggling. Yes, this is turning into the biggest human tragedy in post-apartheid South Africa. We need all the help we can get.

It also calls on a media to say how can we contribute? Are we part of the problem? What can we do? Let us not count how many centimeters were are now giving to an Aids-related article, instead of news on Patricia Lewis' porn video or the latest injury in the Stormers camp.

We need to remind ourselves that we are South Africans before we are journalists and that this extraordinary epidemic is calling for extraordinary responses.

It calls for a media committed to investing in its reporters. It calls for a media that moves away from the notion that the Aids beat is the responsibility of the health reporter, but rather the responsibility of the newspaper as whole.

We need journalists and editors who have the expertise and insight to report on an epidemic that is so much more than a health problem.

I leave you with this thought: Can we honestly afford to treat Aids as just another news story in the light of another recent statement by Dr Peter Piot, the Executive Director of UN Aids Programme – As HIV and the Aids virus spreads further, Africa will face an unprecedented crisis and a challenge never before seen since the advent of slavery.

Thank you