



AIDS Link

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World AIDS Day
1 December
Keep the promise!

Issue 7

Men have the power...

Men in Belize, due to their gender, have traditionally taken on leadership roles in the home and in the community. The church supports this family structure with the Bible passage, women obey your husbands and husbands love your wives.

Like with any position of power, these roles come with certain responsibilities. If men want to maintain their positions of power and want women to obey them, they must ask themselves the

question, "Am I holding up my end of the bargain?" Is it loving to put your wife, children, and future children at risk of HIV, which will lead to death, isolation due to stigma, and poverty because of a lack of financial support?

Men are in an incredible position to change the course of HIV and its effects on Belize. Once they have realized the physical risk that alcohol, unsafe sex, and drug use brings to them and their families they have the power to make the best decisions for the people that put their faith and trust in them - their wives, children, friends, and community.

The home is not the only place where men can use their positive influence for a good cause. Our communities work because we have people who are interested in the welfare of others. Men's roles in business, religious, and governmental sectors give them the prime opportunity to provide for this welfare by incorporating

HIV prevention and education into their work. Without this, what will happen in the long term?

HIV is more than a medical and a social issue. It is also an economic and a governmental problem, one that must be addressed by all sectors. If you own a business or supervise a group of employees, invest in your workforce. Make sure everyone has the correct information about HIV. Educate them on safe

places to access condoms. Allow the time for those who want to get tested. It may be a sacrifice of time in the short term but in the long term you will have knowledgeable, healthy, and dedicated employees, and you won't waste time constantly training new employees. Finally, you will have done a tremendous service to the future health of your country and its people.

Life with HIV/AIDS

A time to get right

"I was in Cayo and feeling very sick with diarrhea so I went to the hospital and asked for an HIV test. That was six years ago. I received a positive diagnosis. I was shocked. I was frightened. I was depressed. I couldn't believe that I even could have been infected, that HIV could happen to me.

"The first person I told was this guy at

Continued on Page 12

It's estimated that 1.3 Belizeans are infected daily with HIV. This is almost 475 people a year. What will happen to our workforce when so many people have died or are unable to work due to HIV?

Belizean Men at Risk of HIV?

Who is at risk?

There are several classifications of men that are at a higher risk of HIV because of their lifestyle and cultural beliefs. However, the fact is any man who is coming in contact with the four body fluids that transmit HIV (blood, semen, vaginal secretions, and breast milk) and is not taking the proper precautions is putting himself at risk of becoming infected with HIV.

Cultural Risks

The social pressure for men to have multiple sex partners begins during adolescence. In some ethnic groups it is a right of passage, seen as a bonding event between father and son, for boys as young as thirteen to visit sex workers for their first sexual experience.

The visiting of sex workers may not be a tradition in every community but across the country young men who are hesitant to become sexually active or are unresponsive to the advances of women are shamed and considered “soft” for waiting until they are physically and emotionally ready to engage in sexual activity. This “macho” attitude that encourages multiple sex partners, risky behavior, and little concern for one’s health is a major cultural factor that leads to the vulnerability of men for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Because of the ingrained acceptance of marital infidelity by men in Belize a majority of men and women expect men to have extramarital affairs (women on the side). This is not a problem that is exclusive to Belize. Globally prevention programs that focused on the “just say no” approach and encouraging men to be monogamous have been deemed ineffective. Instead these programs are now looking to make extramarital sex safer. Research also shows that men directly linked their sexual identity to their reputation in the

community. So in reality, social pressures drive men to engage in physically risky behavior in an effort to play it safe socially.

Around the world male circumcision is performed for various reasons. These include cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and medical benefits. In 2006 it was reported that less than twenty percent of men in Central and South America were circumcised. In Belize, it is not common practice to circumcise men but it could benefit men in the struggle to reduce HIV infections. According to studies done by UNAIDS in South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya, men who were circumcised by well-trained professionals reduced their risk of HIV by 60 percent. With foreskin intact, a warm moist place is created that is a perfect environment for the growth of viruses and bacteria. Circumcision is not a cure but can greatly reduce men’s risk of HIV as well as provide other health benefits such as increased hygiene, decreased prevalence of other STIs, and decreased risk of penile cancer. This surgical procedure is much easier

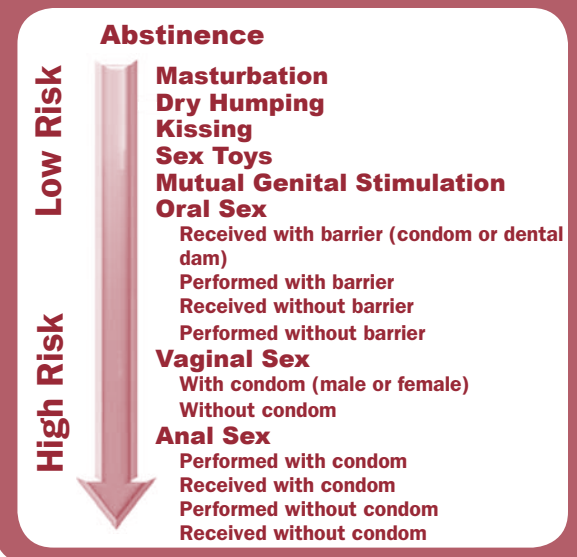
when performed on babies who require only a one week healing process, compared to adults who require a 4-6 week healing period.

Lifestyle Risks

Sexual preferences, drug and alcohol abuse, and numerous sex partners are all lifestyle choices that increase men’s risk of HIV. Men who have sex with men are at an increased risk of HIV infection. So is anyone who engages in anal sex because anal tissue is extremely sensitive and can easily tear. This increases the exchange of body fluids that carry HIV. Being “drunk” or “high” obviously impairs judgment, but it also increases your risk of transmitting HIV. Many men report knowing the facts about the risk of HIV, but when under the influence of various substances, lack concern to take the proper precautions. This could be having sex without a condom or

Sexual Risk Reduction Model

It has been said by some men that wearing a condom is like being given a candy and then told you have to eat it with the wrapper on. If you share in this opinion, review the table below to find ways to reduce your risk of HIV and still find sexual satisfaction. The acts at the top of the table are low risk activities. As you go down the table your risk of HIV increases. Remember that abstinence, having only one sex partner, and always using condoms are the best practices for preventing HIV infection.



sharing needles with another injection drug user. Both of these decisions put men at high risk of HIV infection.

Mobile populations of men such as police, defence force, fishermen, bus drivers, and migrant workers are all put into high risk categories for HIV and are targeted by those doing HIV education and prevention. However, it is their behavior that puts men who are mobile at risk, not their occupation. What these groups have in common is that they spend a large amount of time away from home, away from their primary sexual relationships; some report that they are “deprived of women” and that is what drives them to infidelity and promiscuity. Visiting sex workers and having multiple sex partners (male or female) are what put men at risk of becoming infected with HIV. Because of the mobility of these populations it is also what makes it difficult to control the spread of disease.

Employers are not turning a blind eye to the matters that affect their work force. The Police Department starts HIV education and prevention training at the recruitment level and continues it through to those who are already in the service. Also, some citrus and banana farms are allowing outreach education and testing to be provided to migrant workers through the Meso American Project.

Another target population is the inmates at Belize Central Prison in Hattieville where the HIV infection rate is at 4.9%, double that of the general population. The prison offers educational and counseling services, safer sex supplies, and free testing. In addition, antiretrovirals (medication), proper diet, and care are provided to inmates living with HIV.

Other risks

Sexual contact and injection drug use are the most common ways of becoming infected with HIV but not the only factors. Once people are diagnosed with HIV they are told not to share a toothbrush or a razor. It is important for men who go to the barber for a shave to insist on a new blade so that they are not unknowingly sharing a razor with someone who is HIV positive. Remember no one, not even your barber, can tell if someone has HIV just by looking at them. Tattooing and body piercing can also put you at risk of HIV if the equipment is not properly disinfected after each use.



Possible solutions

- Men encourage men to get tested. The hardest part is getting through the door.
- Communicate with your partner. Share hopes and expectations for your relationship.
- Make sex interesting with your wife or primary partner by increasing creativity in the bedroom so that you don't have to leave your relationship for things to be new and exciting.
- Offer men constructive activities that they enjoy and can share with their children, such as sports that do not involve alcohol and drugs.
- Lastly, if you are willing to take the risk of having sex outside of your marriage it is important to always use condoms with other partners whether they are male or female and follow the instructions of the risk reduction model on page 2.

Sources: 'Men's Infidelity Across Cultures Inevitable' (2007) Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health ; 'Male Circumcision and HIV Prevention' (2007) WHO

Where can I get tested, condoms, and information?

Men's Resources:

Testing

- Belize Family Life Association
- Voluntary Counseling and Testing Center
- House of Hope (Wednesdays in Dangriga)
- Ask at village health posts

Condoms and Information

- Belize Family Life Association
- Voluntary Counseling and Testing Center
- Non-governmental organizations
- Bars
- Look for the Got it? Get It logo

Discussion Topic

How can men reduce their risk of HIV?

When talking about men reducing their risk of HIV many people recognized the social or cultural pressures men face to engage in risky behaviors. However, most felt that culture was not an excuse for behavior and held men accountable for their actions. The following are views, experiences, and approaches that address reducing men's risk of HIV.



**Rodell Perrera,
Alliance Against AIDS**

Men can reduce their risk of HIV by “paying attention and taking responsibility for our health, investing in our health, respecting our health, and making sure we seek information, the same way we shop for shoes or study a soccer schedule. Respect yourself.”

A man living with HIV

“Men need to attend more educational meetings and programs. Get men to come out so they can share information with friends, know how to protect themselves, and know how to stop the spread of HIV. Men are leaders of the family, and it is important that we are educated on ways to keep our family and friends safe, especially from HIV.”

**Douglas Hyde,
Yabra Community Policing Center**

“We need to be honest with ourselves. If I am true to myself, then I am true to my actions. Young males need to realize the seriousness of HIV in our country. Change is not from the outside; it is within ourselves. Secondly, we need more services. We need innovative and creative ways to reach the males in our communities.”

**Steve Enendo,
Program for Toledo Children and Adolescents**

“Men have to forget their invincibility. Alcohol plays a major role. Once drunk, most men will not insist on condoms. Men insist they are clean, that they know themselves or they lie and say they were tested last week. The myth needs to be dispelled that men can wash away HIV when cleaning up after sex.”

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Male youth worker, BFLA Dangriga

“Men need to practice faithfulness, one sex partner.”

Dennis Steinmetz, Punta Gorda

“I believe that it is time for men to think about what love is, I mean what it really is, and not continue to live our lives in the false belief that we are invulnerable and invincible. The fact is we are not, as anyone with HIV/AIDS will probably confirm. We can die, and many of us men do die from HIV/AIDS daily, even with the best available treatment. Oh I know the saying, “You got to die from something.” Well, I’ve seen thousands of men and women die and the only best way is to die in your elder years in your sleep with many loved ones near by. After a long and good life, when your children are grown, and you’ve held your grandchildren on your lap, perhaps even your great-grandchildren, that’s the best time.



“Some people are fond of saying that they fell in love. Well you can fall into bed, but you can’t fall into love. That’s something else, it’s lust, but nowadays we frequently mistake that for love. Love takes time. Without love, sex always carries a risk, and we are not treating our partners as they rightfully deserve. What are the risks? Feelings of remorse, sadness, or guilt are common, even anger and disappointment. These are the risks that can destroy happiness. It takes time to assess the likelihood of these risks appearing. There is the risk of unplanned pregnancies and the transfer of sexually transmitted diseases. These are the risks to our health.

“True love takes time. True love makes sex safe. True love is worth waiting for.”

**Martha Coc,
AIDS Committee Punta Gorda**

“In our community most men are infected because of their behavior. In our culture its accepted that a husband can have as many women as they want and their wife won’t leave them... It is the attitude that has to change, to understand the seriousness of the disease.”



Nurse Tennyson, San Ignacio VCT Center

“They have to practice safer sex to reduce risk, by looking at behaviors and seeing how they can reduce their risk. Men must educate themselves on HIV transmission so that they can educate their family and younger men.”

Fay Zabaneh, Dangriga HIV/AIDS Society

“Little or no attention is given to HIV until it becomes personal. And the lack of personal responsibility has become a part of male culture, which neglects the responsibilities of fatherhood and being a role model for young men.”

Adeliah Pop, Toledo Mayan Women’s Council

“Men should be more responsible to protect themselves and their family. They should be respectful to their wife and family.”

Nurse Marcie Martinez, BFLA Punta Gorda

“Focus more on educating men, getting key men to attend workshops so that they can pass on the education and the correct information. And men need to do away with the belief that HIV isn’t a problem here in Belize.”

Elisa Castellanos, PASMO

“I think that it is an individual responsibility, but also there is a need to help men understand and develop their role in sexuality and sexual and reproductive health...We have to look at attitudes that are at the core of manhood here in Belize.”

Shelmadine A Cacho , WIN-Belize

“In my opinion, Belizean men can reduce their risk of becoming infected with HIV by firstly; changing/challenging the culture. Many men and women, for example, use the excuse that it is all right for men to be promiscuous. In Belize when men have three or four women at one time they are considered to be “romeo” “Playa” or “sweet man” and the list can go on and on. But to be a man does not mean that you have to sleep with as many women as possible. To be a man does not mean that you have to take risks with your life. To be a man does not mean that you have to accept the sexual advances of women. To be a man does not mean that you cannot attend workshops and educate yourself. (Lotta man seh dat da oman fu go da workshops.)

HIV/AIDS is real! Our culture needs to change. We need to allow our men the space and place to grow. As a community, we need to accept the differences that we all have. The only way forward is for us to all work together, men and women. We need to change our behavior. It is important that we all accept this challenge. Remember, *‘Our actions we may choose, but the consequences we must accept.’*”

Nurse Mary Bernardez, BFLA Dangriga

“The men need to be circumcised, and new mothers need to be encouraged to circumcise their male babies.”

**Nurse Dolly Witz, BFLA San Ignacio**

“I believe they can reduce their risk by getting the right information and making the right decisions. Very few men can abstain from sex. If they cannot abstain they should limit their partners and use a condom every time they have sex.”

Ruby Magana, HECOPAB Corozal

“In Latino countries the first thing is the machismo attitude, having two or three women has to be addressed. The majority of infections in Belize are through sexual contact. People have to take responsibility for behaviors. Love yourself. Value yourself. You, yourself have to decide, do I want to live or die? Also, we need to focus on youth and mold their behaviors so they become people who understand the severity of HIV and what effects the disease can have on the community and their family.”

**Kirsty McKay, Red Cross Belize City**

“The Red Cross is still using the ABC approach however ... now we are moving the emphasis to being faithful to one’s partner in combination with condom use in order to address the problem of promiscuity which exists not only among men but among women as well.

“Men can protect themselves by remaining faithful to their partners in addition to consistently and correctly using condoms at all times.

“Non-governmental organizations also need to be more vocal about the services that are out there for men.”

Who's Who

Alliance Against AIDS

Who is AAA?

The Alliance Against AIDS (AAA) is a community-based, non-profit, non-governmental organization, which provides and advocates for ethical, quality care, and support for persons living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) and their families, and serves as a catalyst to purge discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS.

How it all started

AAA was started by Rodel Beltran Perera and a group of professional friends who were all witnessing people who were close to them die from AIDS related illnesses in the mid 1990's. In 1997, after securing funding from Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), AAA registered as a non-governmental organization (NGO) with a group of twelve members and opened its doors to clients in late 1997. This was the first NGO in Belize to deal specifically with the issues of HIV/AIDS. However, AAA's executive director, Beltran Perrera, first got involved in AIDS activism in 1986, when the pandemic began here in Belize.

Over the past decade AAA has seen a tremendous amount of growth. They now have four staff members and have trained over fifty volunteers. With this support, the Alliance is able to provide many services to people who are infected and affected by HIV as well as the community.

How we serve

AAA is dedicated to using a human rights approach when serving PLWHA. The right of equal access to quality treatment and care, the right to confidentiality of health information, and the right to have a voice concerning issues that affect them are held in the highest regard. "I feel safe at the Alliance, especially how they attend to confidentiality", commented one of AAA's clients.

Services provided

For those who are positive, AAA offers individual counseling, a monthly support group, an informational hotline, referrals for everything from housing to helping with medical expenses, and the opportunity to be a part of the HIV+ network. This network notifies members when there are trainings that address the specific

interests of people who are living with HIV and when there are opportunities to advocate for better treatment and care.

AAA offers several services to the community at large. They have the capacity and the funding to provide HIV 101 presentations to the private and public sector. Any group, whether it is a school, business or civic club, can contact AAA and set up a time for their group to receive HIV education. AAA's informational hotline, 223-6911, is available to anyone from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. This is a way to get information or support and can be anonymous if callers choose not to reveal their names. The Alliance provides referrals for testing and the pre and post test counseling needed to make the best decisions about testing and how to deal with results.

Agency challenges

AAA continues to search for future funding to maintain the capacity and quality of their services. Also, there are the challenges of stigma and discrimination when it comes to encouraging individuals to test early and often so that they can know their status and prevent the spread of the virus.

Hopes for the future

In the early years AAA members set this goal, "By 2010 all PLWHA and their families throughout Belize are free to enjoy meaningful, productive, healthy and happy lives." As this date approaches and AAA continues to foster this hope they look at ways to make this happen. They hope to support more individuals who are HIV+ to become involved in advocacy and the shaping of government policies towards HIV. Also, they hope to have their own building that would provide a multitude of services: education, prevention, testing, counseling, a safe space for support groups, and an end of life care facility for those who are in the final stages of HIV and have no where to turn.

How to contact AAA

To access the services mentioned in this article, learn more about how to get involved, or support the efforts of AAA, contact 223-6493 or visit their office on Meighan Avenue in Belize City.



Nationwide News and Services

National AIDS Commission (NAC) intends to have a national meeting in the month of November where plans can be made for World AIDS Day events. NAC hopes to launch the National AIDS Commission's new website and to recognize persons who have committed to the struggle against HIV in Belize in the days surrounding World AIDS Day.

Alliance Against AIDS (AAA), with the help of \$15,000BZ funding from Life Line Foundation, was able



Rodel Ferrara, AAA Director

to supply children who are infected and affected by HIV with school bags full of supplies to start the school year off right. The bags were filled with school supplies, such as markers, exercise books, and pencil sharpeners, as well as toiletries to promote proper hygiene. Additionally, the children who are HIV+ were supplied with vitamin supplements. AAA

thanks Bradley's Import, Angelus Press, and A & R for providing corporate discounts for items purchased for this project.

The National Forum for Women and HIV held by the Women's Department in Dangriga on 18th September was a success, with over 80 people in attendance. Among those present were a group of standard 5 and 6 students from St. Augustine R.C. school. The topics discussed were sex and sexuality, prevention and care, and treatment and support. Out of this meeting came the need to focus on working in and with rural communities.

United Belize Advocacy Movement (UNIBAM) held a workshop on 13th October in Corozal focused on the needs of lesbian and men who have sex with men. Topics that were discussed included human rights and HIV, sexual identities, stigma and discrimination and STIs. Also, UNIBAM recently completed a documentary film titled "Not in my Family" which addresses the process of coming out of the closet, tolerance, and economic issues. The film includes a segment with a professor explaining sexual identities.

PASMO is please to announce that on 29th October to 2nd November a workshop will be held in Belize City to train men who have sex with men (MSM) and commercial sex workers (CSW) as peer educators. The workshop will be led by a Guatemalan facilitator. PASMO hopes to have at least one CSW and MSM from each district in attendance. More are welcome. PASMO will also be in Dangriga at satellite tables during the week of Garifuna Settlement Day starting on 19th November. Peace Corps volunteers have been trained to assist. Contact PASMO at 223-7066 if you would like to help.

WIN-Belize Torch Run will begin in Punta Gorda on 17th November and end in Corozal on 1st December stopping in all the districts of Belize including San Pedro and Caye Caulker. Some of the objectives of the Torch Run are to increase awareness about gender based violence and HIV/AIDS, to strengthen collaboration among agencies, and to promote healthy lifestyle choices. The Torch Run is part of an international event known as the 16 Days of Activism, which begins on 25th November, Zero Tolerance Day (International Day against Gender Based Violence) and ends on 10th December, International Human Rights Day. Events will be held throughout Belize to raise awareness of these social issues. If you are interested in getting involved contact WIN-Belize at 227-1069 to find out who the committee chair is for your district.

Caring for Children Network (CfC) will launch a promotional campaign on 28th November to raise awareness for children infected and affected with HIV



and to encourage donations that will help ensure their human rights are recognized. Donations of food, clothing, and supplies will be collected nationwide through schools, churches, and businesses. Churches are also being asked to hold services on 2nd and 9th December to support the children spiritually and to provide them with Christmas presents. The campaign is managed in each district by

health professionals who assess the needs of children infected or affected by HIV (see district news).

District News and Services

Corozal District

GoJoven will sponsor a World AIDS Day Rock Concert on Saturday, 1st December at the Corozal Civic Center beginning at 1pm. Donations collected at the door will be given to Hand-in-Hand Ministries Children's Center in Belize City.

Corozal HECOPAB has planned various activities leading up to World AIDS Day. These include workshops in high schools, poster and poem contests, a candle light vigil, and HIV prevention messages to be delivered to village meetings, women's groups, and youth groups. Also, they are hoping to organize a health fair on 30th November to address a variety of health concerns.

Caring for Children Campaign information on how to donate to or access assistance for children infected or affected by HIV can be obtained by contacting Ruby Magana at 422-2080 or Atlantic Bank at 422-3473.

Toledo District

The AIDS Committee took part in a public health fair in September put on by the Catholic parish in Punta Gorda. This event was open to the public and was attended by many classes from the local school. The committee estimates that they reached over 100 students. Ms. Ofelia Gomez was elected as the committee's new chair in late October. The group is now focusing on plans for local World AIDS Day events.

BFLA in Punta Gorda will be offering reduced cost Pap Smears in the month of November. This is an important screening to prevent cervical cancer for all women, but especially important for those who are HIV positive, to have once a year.

Toledo Mayan Women's Council (TMWC) is still working to give Mayan women options through skills that allow them to work from home. The current programming is a literacy project in the outlying villages and a sewing program that brings Mayan women into Punta Gorda to develop their skills as seamstresses. Also, TMWC has selected five villages to present their Healthy Mother, Healthy Babies series. This project with the help of UNICEF funding is able to provide seven different presentations that address topics from family violence to health and hygiene. However, there is **8** currently a need for a presenter to address HIV/AIDS

in the Sexual and Reproductive Health presentation. Translators are available so Que'chi language skills are not needed. Interested persons can contact them at 722-0043.

Caring for Children Campaign information on how to donate to or access assistance for children infected or affected by HIV & AIDS can be obtained by contacting Nurse Alvarez at 722-2026 or TOLCA at 722-2191.

Cayo District

Cornerstone Foundation is organizing many events in the San Ignacio area to bring awareness to domestic violence and HIV/AIDS issues during this year's 16 Days of Activism. Activities include a poster contest for Std V students and an essay contest for 3rd form students, work shops for professionals and educators, and candle light vigils in towns and villages. For more information, come to the office at 90 Burns Avenue or call 678-9909.

World AIDS Day activities will be conducted at the market in San Ignacio on 1st December, including guest speakers, an AIDS Walk, an information table, and a donation box to help PLWHA and their children. Activities will be conducted by The Cornerstone Foundation, Cayo AIDS Committee, and Creation Care. For more information, contact Cornerstone at 678-9909.

BFLA in San Ignacio would like to remind people that walk-in testing is available on Thursdays and any other time Nurse Witz is free. BFLA also offers free condoms to individuals and organizations in the Cayo district.

Caring for Children information on how to donate to or access assistance for children infected or affected by HIV can be obtained by contacting Nurse Anderson in Belmopan at 822-2263 and the VCT Center at 824-3129 or Cornerstone at 678-9909 in San Ignacio.

Belize District

Youth Enhancement Services' (YES) Advocacy and Outreach program has developed a video entitled *Precious*, which deals with the issue of HIV stigma. After positive feedback from viewers, funding has been secured from UNFPA to mass produce this video so that it can be shared with schools throughout Belize. YES hopes to have this video shown in high schools and

upper levels of primary schools and that the screening will be followed by a classroom discussion.

Yabra Community Policing Center has recently hired Douglas Hyde (formerly with Youth for the Future) as part of a five year policing plan that focuses on youth, youth development, and community. The programming uses a multifaceted approach to address gang reduction and HIV prevention. Some of the activities include street outreach by peer educators, youth friendly drop-in space filled with information, job skills training, a feeding program for neighborhood children, and an after school program run by older youth. Hyde is hopeful that programming will expand to include strategies to reduce drug and alcohol abuse.



Yabra Community Policing Center

Red Cross' Together We Can (TWC) held discussion groups to decide which topics teens were interested in having discussed on the 'Real Deal' radio show. Feedback showed youth want to discuss issues of street violence and gun culture, teenage pregnancy, and HIV/AIDS. TWC is researching the best date and time in order to get the maximum awareness and engagement in the show as well as looking at different advertising techniques to more effectively let people know about their program.

Caring for Children Campaign information on how to donate to or access assistance for children infected or affected by HIV & AIDS can be obtained by contacting Nurse Bradley at the VCT Center at 223-0541.

Orange Walk District

Caring for Children Campaign information on how to donate to or access assistance for children infected or affected by HIV & AIDS can be obtained by contacting Angelita Sanchez at 322-2072.

Orange Walk HIV/AIDS Committee is currently planning World AIDS Day events with the hope of collaborating with other local organizations. Events planned thus far include a candle light vigil to be held on 30th November in the park. The highlight of this event will be an HIV positive speaker. Also, on the 30th the local high schools will have a rags day fundraiser

where students will donate a dollar toward HIV services. On 1st December, World AIDS Day, the group will begin events in the park with an opening ceremony followed by presentations from two guest speakers and will conclude with a parade. They hope to have as much youth involvement as possible.

Orange Walk BFLA is proud to announce the opening of their youth resource center. This space is where the newly formed youth group will meet on Friday evenings. At the first meeting on 5th October, twenty-five people were in attendance. Gema Catzim, BFLA youth worker, will work hours flexible to meet youth's schedules, possibly including Saturdays. The youth center will offer free internet access, incorporate health education into programming and have services available to youth at a 25% discount.

Stann Creek District

POWA Fu Women with the help of UNICEF have developed a Community Ambassadors Program in Dangriga town. This program is aimed to equip strategic members of the community with knowledge about HIV, safer sex supplies and pamphlets. These community ambassadors could be taxi drivers, garbage men, teachers, bartenders, or any trusted community member who interacts with a number of people and is willing to share information. If this pilot program is successful it is hopeful that this can be duplicated throughout Stann Creek district.

Youth Advocacy Movement (YAM) at BFLA is fundraising for a toy and food drive to support their December children's project. If you would like to get involved in this project please contact Joel at 502-2280.

HIV Projekt Belize, based in Dangriga, has recently received donations of plywood from Habet's Hardware and A&D Construction and Home Essentials. This donation will be used to construct boxes for condom and safer sex information distribution in bars and clubs throughout the country.

Caring for Children Campaign information on how to donate to or access assistance for children infected or affected by HIV & AIDS can be obtained by contacting Nurse Humphries at 522-3834.

Living With HIV/AIDS

Opportunistic Infections

Opportunistic Infections (OIs) are infections that prey on a weakened immune system. There are over 30 different OIs that infect people who are HIV positive. The Ministry of Health reports the most common OIs among people living with HIV in Belize are candidiasis and cryptococcal meningitis. They predict that we will see an increase in the number of TB cases in the future. Based on this information, AIDS Link chose to focus on these OIs.

Candidiasis (Thrush)

What Is it?

Candidiasis, also called thrush, is a disease caused by a fungus. This fungus can be found on the skin, in the stomach, the colon and rectum, the vagina, and in the mouth and throat of everyone. This fungus is generally harmless and helps keep our bodies bacteria levels properly regulated. However, when there is too much fungus it can lead to a variety of problems.

Candidiasis can affect everyone not just those people who are HIV positive. Stress, poor diet, or not getting enough rest all contribute to the overgrowth of candidiasis. Many women experience vaginal yeast infections and both men and women experience an overgrowth of fungus in their mouth or the back of their throat, which are both forms of candidiasis.

In people living with HIV oral thrush and vaginal yeast infections can occur at any time, regardless of their T-cell counts. The more the immune system becomes damaged, the more likely it is that there will be an occurrence of oral thrush and vaginal yeast infections.

They also reoccur more frequently. HIV-positive people with damaged immune systems, usually with a T-cell count less than 200, are also more likely to develop candidiasis deeper in their bodies, such as in their throat or in their lungs.

Treatment

Because of the different areas of the body that are affected and the varying severity of each case, different drugs are used. It is important that when you consult your doctor about treatment, you tell them all the drugs you are currently taking as some treatments may interact negatively with HIV medications or alcohol.

Prevention

- Watch your diet: It may be helpful to avoid foods high in sugar, dairy, yeast, wheat and caffeine. These ingredients promote fungal overgrowth.
- Eat yogurt: Experts recommend eating yogurt because it contains a “good” bacteria believed to keep fungus levels in check.
- Practice good oral hygiene: This includes brushing regularly, flossing, using an antiseptic mouthwash, and reducing/eliminating the use of tobacco products such as chewing tobacco and cigarettes.
- To help reduce the risk of vaginal infections: Wear loose, natural-fiber clothing and undergarments with a cotton crotch. Also, stay away from deodorant tampons and feminine deodorant spray.



Candidiasis Symptoms

Thrush of the throat:

- Pain and difficulty when swallowing
- Chest pain

This type of candidiasis occurs deep down in the throat and can't always be seen by looking into the mouth.

Thrush of the mouth:

- Burning pain in the mouth or throat
- Changes in taste (especially when eating spicy or sweet foods)
- Difficulty swallowing
- White or pinkish-red blotches on the tongue, gums, the sides or roof of the mouth, and the back of the throat
- Corners of the mouth to become chapped, cracked, and sore (in some cases)

Vaginal Yeast Infection:

- Thick white discharge resembling cottage cheese
- Itching and burning in or around the vagina
- Rash and tenderness of the outer lips of the vagina (the labia)

HIV positive women are more likely to experience recurrent vaginal yeast infections than HIV negative women.

Cryptococcal meningitis

What is it?

Cryptococcal meningitis is a serious infection of the brain and spinal column that can occur in people living with HIV. This infection is caused by a fungus very commonly found in the environment, in the soil or in bird droppings. The fungus is called *Cryptococcus neoformans*. Most people are exposed to this fungus at some point in their life and have a healthy enough immune system to prevent the fungus from causing disease. For those living with a HIV and a weakened immune system (T-cell count below 50 in most cases), *Cryptococcus neoformans* is especially dangerous. If this fungus is kicked up into the air, it can be inhaled and deposited in the lungs. From there, the fungus can travel through the blood to the spinal column and brain where it can cause disease.

Treatment

First, it has to be determined that you are suffering from cryptococcal meningitis, which can be done by a blood test or a spinal tap (taking fluid from your spine). Once it is confirmed that you have the fungus in your blood you will begin treatment. This treatment depends on the seriousness of your infections and can last anywhere from three to six months possibly longer depending on your body's response to the medications.

Prevention

Because *Cryptococcus neoformans* is found in many parts of the environment it is extremely hard to prevent. The best way to prevent this opportunistic infection is to try to maintain the healthiest immune system possible. This can be done by taking antiretroviral medications on time and at the correct dosage 100% of the time, eating a proper diet, taking vitamins, drinking enough water, and getting enough sleep.

Meningitis Symptoms

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Stiff neck
- Body aches
- Headaches (often severe)
- Nausea/vomiting
- Skin lesions
- Confusion
- Muddled thinking
- Vision problems
- Seizures (in some cases)



Tuberculosis

What is it?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a serious lung disease that can be life-threatening if not treated correctly. TB is the world's most common disease caused by an infectious organism. Nearly two billion people in the world are diagnosed with TB every year, a disease that is also responsible for the deaths of nearly three million people annually. In fact, TB is the number-one cause of death of HIV-infected people across the globe. The bacteria that causes TB is spread from one person to another by tiny drops of fluid that leave an infected lung and make their way through the air to lungs of someone nearby. Once inside the new lungs, the bacteria establishes infection. Most people with healthy immune systems can prevent the bacteria from causing TB. However, people with suppressed immune systems, including HIV, may not be able to control the bacteria and it will eventually lead to infection and active disease.

Treatment

Treatment can begin after it is confirmed that someone is infected with TB. This can be done by a skin test (not always reliable for people with HIV), a blood test, or x-ray depending on your doctor and the facilities available. Like with other OIs, treatment depends on the individual case. More severe the infections require stronger medications. Because this is a disease that can be spread to others it is important to seek medical attention when you first start to develop symptoms.

Prevention

If you are HIV positive and living or working with someone who has active TB it would be wise to isolate yourself from that person and let your doctor know about possible TB exposure.

Tuberculosis Symptoms

- Cough (main symptom)
- Night sweats
- Chills
- Weight loss
- Fever
- Fatigue

Between April and June of 2007 fifteen new case of TB were reported among people living with HIV in Belize district

Sources: 'Candidiasis' (2005), 'TB' (2005), 'Meningitis' (2005) www.AIDSmeds.com

Ministry of Health HIV Testing Statistics January through June

District	2006			2007		
	Tested	Positive	Prevalence	Tested	Positive	Prevalence
Corozal	62	2	3.2	152	4	2.6
Orange Walk	358	1	0.3	298	8	2.7
Belize	3913	168	4.3	3467	183	5.3
Cayo	351	8	2.3	655	9	1.4
Stann Creek	581	22	3.8	231	24	10.4
Toledo	40	0	0	67	1	1.5

The Ministry of Health encourages everyone to get an HIV test and know their status. Corozal, Cayo, and Toledo districts have been successful at increasing the number of individuals that are getting tested. Orange Walk, Belize, and Stann Creek districts have been successful at identifying people living with HIV, which gives them the option to access treatment and care. Belize Central Prison also supports testing among inmates. Currently, they are testing approximately twenty people per week.

A time to get right

Continued from Page 1

Remar who was living with AIDS at the time. Then I called my mother in the States. Both were accepting. It wasn't until I told my sister here in Belize that I felt discrimination. She thought that if a mosquito would bite me and bite her, then she and her family would be infected. After much education about the virus she began to understand that she was not at risk and began to accept me, gave me a place to stay, and allowed her children to come around me.

"I want people to understand that talking about HIV makes you feel better. Holding it inside like a secret

destroys you. The more I talk about HIV the better it is for me and those around me, to be aware.

"The testing helped make me a better life and one where I won't feel badly for unknowingly infecting someone else. It helps me to take better care of myself. I encourage all to get tested and to know their status. So if you are positive you have a time to get right - you can live a healthy and happy life knowing that you can protect your community by stopping the spread of the virus and educating others. And if your test results are negative you can stay that way. HIV is a preventable disease - **Protect Yourself!**"

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