

HIV peer educators a major response

Thousands of HIV/AIDS peer educators have come forward in workplaces all over South Africa. **David Dickinson** tells of a recent study which details, amongst other things, who they are and what they do.

Peer educators are in the front line of many workplace HIV/AIDS programmes. Most do this education work voluntarily although companies provide them with basic training in HIV/AIDS. These educators then share this information with co-workers. The effectiveness of their work depends on their understanding of their co-workers and the personal contact that they keep with them.

In 2003 the Department of Labour recommended a ratio of one peer educator to every 50 employees. If this became a reality in South Africa's formal economy there would be around 150 000 peer educators, probably more than the national count of shop stewards.

During 2005 I conducted the first large survey of workplace HIV/AIDS peer educators which gives a better understanding of who they are and what they do. The research was conducted in five large South African companies with approximately 1 780 peer educators; a ratio of one to every 69 employees (see Table below).

PROFILE OF EDUCATORS

On average the 614 peer educators who responded to the questionnaire have been in their company for 12 years. Many are religiously active. They are also active in the workplace as trade union members (77%), shop stewards (past or present, 30%) and health & safety representatives (past

or present, 43%). The majority are close to the AIDS epidemic – 83% know somebody with HIV well or have known well somebody who died of AIDS. This is of course reinforced by their peer educator activity. Finally, 47% of the educators are involved in some form of community HIV/AIDS project.

Since peer education is largely voluntary, the typical educator is concerned about the well being of others, at work or in the community.

By comparing the profile of the peer educators to the overall profile of the companies' workforce, as reported in their Employment Equity Reports, it is clear that concern around the AIDS epidemic is not being shouldered equally by all races and genders.

Peer educators are not representative of the workforce as a whole. Most noticeable, is the over representation of women as peer educators and these are mainly African women. In fact, African women are over-represented by

Companies participating in the research

Sector	Employees	Major Union(s)	Active Peer (Estimated) Peer educator to	Ratio: employees
Auto	3,500	Numsa	45	1:78
Auto	4,000	Numsa	85	1:47
Financial	29,500	Sasbo	450	1:66
Mining	44,500	NUM & UASA	400	1:111
Retail	41,500	Saccawu	800	1:52
Total	123,000		1,780	1:69

Sources: Interviews and Company Employment Equity Reports

104%, while, for example, white men are under-represented by 81%. This reflects, firstly, the greater burden that the AIDS epidemic is placing on Africans and on women. This is in line with the 2005 HSRC national prevalence survey which showed that HIV rates are higher among Africans and higher among women. It also reflects the gendered division of care in society. It is women who mainly take on caring roles. The role of caring, traditionally linked to the home has been extended into the workplace.

PEER EDUCATORS AND TRAINING

In the past the company sent peer educators on a training course of between two and five days and then left them to sink or swim in the workplace. Increasingly, however, companies are realising that sustaining peer education requires ongoing refresher or follow up training, to keep educators up to date and motivated. While the majority of educators had received initial training, almost 30% have not received any refresher training.

The educators generally reported high levels of satisfaction with the training and it was clear that some high quality training programmes were in place. Despite this, they felt training could be further improved and this would be appreciated by many peer educators who often expressed a keen interest in learning more about HIV/AIDS and what they could do in response.

PEER EDUCATOR ACTIVITIES

Peer educators conduct a range of activities in the workplace. The most common of these is giving formal talks to co-workers on HIV/AIDS, having informal discussions with people at work and in the community, supporting company HIV/AIDS programmes such as voluntary counselling and

testing, along with other actions such as combating stigma, distributing condoms, lay counselling and encouraging people to talk openly about sex.

Despite problems that many educators face in giving formal talks to co-workers, especially as they work in high-pressure production areas, the number of educators doing so was almost 90%. Most educators give these talks on a weekly or monthly basis.

In general although some peer educators give formal talks to very large groups, the majority speak to less than 20 in this way. One implication of this is that the Department of Labour's suggested ratio of one peer educator for every 50 employees may not reflect reality on the ground and that a lower ratio might be more appropriate.

An interesting finding was that peer educators who gave formal presentations to co-workers also had more informal interactions than those who did not. This is probably because, by standing up and identifying themselves as an educator, people knew that they could go to them to ask for advice or information in a less public way. Most peer educators both in the workplace and in the community conduct informal activity such as chats in tea breaks and one-on-one sessions.

Since personal contact may be one of the most effective ways of getting people to change attitudes and behaviour, this informal activity presents a powerful response to HIV/AIDS. This is especially so when the contribution of each individual peer educator is multiplied by the total number of peer educators.

PEER EDUCATOR DIFFICULTIES

An important finding is the extent to which peer educator activity can

be stressful. This 'emotional labour' is something that results from dealing with people infected or affected by HIV/AIDS or, other social problems, such as rape or abuse, that peer educators often deal with.

Almost 40% of peer educators reported that a co-worker had disclosed their HIV-positive status to them and just over 50% said that informal discussions with co-workers were sometimes emotionally stressful. The need to maintain confidentiality often adds to this stress as they can't talk to anybody about what they know. This raises the need for peer educators themselves to get emotional support to prevent them from 'burning out' so that they can remain on the 'front line' of company responses to HIV/AIDS.

CONCLUSION

This article has highlighted only some of the research findings. However, it is clear that peer education in large South African companies is extensive, that the burden of this work is not equally shared, and that they are conducting a range of, sometimes difficult, activities. This is a major response to HIV/AIDS which deserves support. The next issue of the *Bulletin* will look at the sometimes difficult relationship between peer educators and trade unions in the company and will suggest ways that this could be improved.

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