

Six deadly myths on the shopfloor

A problem facing unions and employers in the fight against HIV/AIDS is debunking myths. Imraan Buccas looks at the dynamics of HIV/AIDS in the textile industry and workers' knowledge of the disease.

In the last few years there has been much debate on HIV/AIDS, concentrating mostly on the controversial positions adopted by President Thabo Mbeki. The epidemic has and will have, according to researchers, devastating effects on the country's productive working class, as well as the rural and urban youth, which constitutes the future of this country in terms of skills acquisition, future development and growth. Such an important phenomenon has obviously attracted great attention on the part of researchers throughout the world and South Africa in particular.

Although there have been various calculations of present and projected victims among productive and skilled workers in various sectors of the economy, there seem to be limited industry-specific case studies. Awareness and knowledge of issues revolving around HIV/AIDS is crucial for workers on the shopfloor. In today's circumstances, knowledge about the disease and its various angles is power in the hands of the people. Ignorance is dangerous. It is in this context that an assessment of the knowledge and awareness of workers, particularly in

the textile industry becomes important.

There has been international and national research regarding various steps to be undertaken to educate workers and other community members about the roots and prevention of HIV/AIDS. These steps need to be seen as very important ingredients in the fight against the disease as they are based on concrete experiences on the African continent and worldwide.

Generally shop stewards agree that workers have a significant degree of awareness of the problem. They are also positive about the role of the union (Sactwu) on awareness campaigns. Participation of shop stewards in public lectures and workshops, organised by the union, is certainly a practical and tangible way of tackling a major social problem.

Shop stewards, however, are not so sure whether the same commitment against the scourge exists in the employers' camp. Clearly, there is a sense that negativity towards employer attitudes does exist. Interviews with shop stewards revealed that they were negative and dismissive of the employer's attitudes towards victims of

the disease. They felt that the general attitude of the vast majority of employers towards workers and especially those infected was completely insensitive and without care. Thus the only institutions that tried to make workers aware were the trade unions. This, the workers' representatives felt was a real tragedy, because HIV/AIDS had a very important message to employers: that nothing could be saved without the workers. Their business would be dead without the skilled and semi-skilled labour that produces the goods.

Workers' knowledge of how HIV/AIDS is spread

The responses are recorded in the table below:

<i>How is AIDS spread?</i>	
RESPONSE	%
SEX (ONLY)	20
SEX AND BLOOD TRANSFUSION	75
DON'T KNOW	5

It can be seen that the majority of respondents answered this question properly and appropriately. It was reported that all workers with the

This section is sponsored by the HIV/AIDS programme of the Solidarity Center.

exception of a young male, who did not know, answered the question without hesitation. This can obviously be assigned to the various educational programmes undertaken by the union in collaboration with management, discussions amongst the workers and commendable collaboration between the various stakeholders on the shopfloor.

'Cure' and prevention

Interestingly some workers subscribe to the notion that there is a possibility of a cure for HIV/AIDS. 'Medical people and researchers throughout the world are trying to find a cure and African traditional healers can help. This is due to their spiritual links with the ancestors and African civilisation,' said one worker. Such positions are seen as common within certain sections of South African society and constitute a strong cultural and traditional component of the existing contemporary fabric of African society.

Workers are adequately aware that condoms help in the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

However, the view that condoms could not be trusted for many reasons, the most important being that the government imported cheap ones that break easily, is a pronounced one. Abstention is a view that emanates strongly from within the textile worker ranks. This is also a position advocated by all mainstream churches in South Africa and has reached large sections of all communities in South Africa.

Frighteningly some males have the view that the use of condoms has nothing to do with the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

'I do not believe that condoms could prevent HIV/AIDS, but nevertheless I use them occasionally when I go to the shebeens during the weekend,' a young father of two said. 'Condoms are not

the solution to the problems associated with the prevention of the spreading of HIV/AIDS. Condoms are not safe but they are somehow a protection.'

'Faithfulness and the careful choosing of partners are much safer ways in the fight against AIDS and other sexual diseases,' two women workers explained. Generally women workers tended to have more solid positions on such matters than men.

Common myths

Interviews with workers revealed that the most common myths were:

- HIV/AIDS does not really exist.
- The use of the condom is against the cultural traditions of the Zulus and other African people.
- Prostitutes do not carry AIDS.
- Sex with a virgin will cure AIDS.
- Strong umuthi (traditional medicine) can cure AIDS.
- Strong and virile men will never get AIDS.

The need for these misconceptions about the virus and the disease to be completely destroyed is pressing as it impacts on the immediate future of the South African working class. There were also myths that umuthi (African medicine) could help those who are HIV positive. Within African communities the role of the traditional healers is very important, even revered, and this is one of the problem areas. There is a strong belief amongst many workers that traditional healers can cure everything, and such an attitude has a serious, sometimes detrimental effect.

These myths are very deeply rooted in the psyche and the minds of very large numbers of the workers who are very close to their cultural and

traditional roots. Workshops and seminars in the work environment play a critical role in debunking some of the existing myths.

Conclusion

Although it is clear that education and training play a very positive role in increasing knowledge and awareness about the disease, there are myths, cultural and historical factors and misconceptions, that still exist. These shaped attitudes, opinions, ideas and beliefs to a large extent. The positive aspects of awareness and knowledge are strengthened by continuous discussions amongst the workers about the virus both in the factory and the communities as well as the concerted efforts of all stakeholders to enhance the levels of knowledge and awareness amongst workers. The problem facing many trade unions and employers alike is to beat the myths and impart real knowledge and sex education to their workers. Hence it is important for stakeholders to be educated on prevention strategies that have succeeded in Africa, and their possible sustainability. It is well known that concerted educational efforts have yielded positive results in West Africa.

Buccas is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This article is based on research he conducted.