

campaigns that provide clear, consistent messages to educate people about HIV transmission and prevention as well as the positive outcomes of treatment.

Summary

The sample of clinicians participating is obviously not representative. But continuing with the survey seemed pointless and we decided to abort the process. The trend of the answers was not surprising; after all this is a journal of child health and our target is the child health practitioner. There is a clear non-ambiguous thread going through most of the answers, i.e. universal opt-out HIV testing, optimising PMTCT and ensuring appropriate access to HAART. Sounds simple enough, so what is the problem? Maybe that should have been the topic of the survey! An interesting look at some issues that may be contributing to blockages to achieving effective disease prevention and treatment was the unexpected additional note

from one of the participants (please see below). Yes, addressing the blockages to the delivery of universally accepted strategies – that is the real challenge of this epidemic!

I would like to thank all participants and those who recommended others. Clinicians and researchers are busy people. We understand the pressure on your time and we are grateful for your contribution. Please suggest future subjects and contributors for this 'hot topics' section of the journal. Volunteers to put this section together are also invited.

Nonhlanhla P Khumalo

Editor

Reference

1. Rehle T, Shisana O, Pillay V, Zuma K, Puren A, Parker W. National HIV incidence measures – new insights into the South African epidemic. *S Afr Med J* 2007; 97(3):194-199.

LETTER

The mother tongue as educational medium

To the Editor: Thank you for your recent editorial 'Who determines culture? (*SAMJ* 2007; 97: 385) Indeed, *language* carries thinking and the concepts of how we understand life, the community and ourselves. The HIV epidemic needs strong primary prevention programmes for children and adolescents and improved PMTCT programmes. Both need powerful communication. For this I suggest a *pro-African language approach*.

I grew up in Finland. The country gained independence in 1916 and changed quickly from a developing country into a leading industrial democracy. How? Through changing the medium of education from a colonial language (Swedish) to the mother tongue. Consistent use of Finnish by political and educational leaders, both in private and public life, made this move credible. Is this relevant with regard to South Africa? Finnish is structurally as distant from the colonisers' languages (Swedish and Russian) as African languages are distant from English. It is estimated that less than half of all children are highly gifted in languages. Only these children will survive an educational system with a structurally different language as their medium of education. The other children will drop out, and their talents will never be seen or developed. I think this is happening in South Africa, and that this is a violation of children's rights to development and education (as signed by South Africa in 1996). The educational crisis may also be fuelling the HIV epidemic.

By having one's mother tongue as the medium of education as an option for parents to choose (as suggested in our constitution, but actually not implemented), we would unlock

the development of talents of half of our children who are presently becoming dropouts.

The other benefit of using one's mother tongue is building a stronger identity and personality. I suspect that the early and dominating use of English leads to split personalities in many children and young adults in Africa. Split personalities cannot stand firm in life's decisions. Many young Africans despise their own roots. Upper-class children (in private schools) despise the language of their parents and grandparents. This results in further loss of social cohesion, which makes the society vulnerable to crime and epidemics. Self-contempt and contempt for one's own roots make young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation and domination by materialism.

Finland could dispel the misunderstanding that mother tongue-based education leads to poor English skills. Of course English should be taught as a subject. But parents should not be forced to adopt a colonial language as the only vehicle to obtain development and education for all children, irrespective of whether the latter have the extraordinary and rare language skills to master education in a structurally distant language.

Language gives meaning to life and communicates meaning between people and between generations. It is the basis for respect (for self and others). I do not think we can do without stronger focus on African languages if we want to build hope for the future and a strong will to protect our own life and the lives of others.

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Mafikeng