

Zambia: Circumcision revolution

Studio cue

Major research trials have shown that circumcised men are less likely than uncircumcised men to contract HIV as a result of heterosexual intercourse. As a result of this research the World Health Organisation is urging men in countries badly affected by HIV and AIDS to volunteer for circumcision.

Zambia urgently needs to cut infection rates. But how are researchers and the media handling such a sensitive subject and are the facts getting through? Arnold Tutu reports

Script

Vox Pops: Men and women in Lusaka talk about male circumcision – explaining how they heard about it...

Male voice: Male circumcision is the removal of man's foreskin. Of late I've heard people talk about circumcision being a preventative measure against HIV. I'm told it helps I don't know how true it is.

Male voice: I think I heard about it on the radio ZNBC - Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation. As for me I just don't want to do it anyway.

Female voice: I've heard a bit from friends or maybe people on a bus just casually talking about it. All I know is that the foreskin of the penis is cut off

Male voice: Nowadays they're talking more about it on radios in the print media and I've seen some posters encouraging people to go for male circumcision I believe from what I've learned that it reduces the risk of one getting infected with the virus that causes AIDS

Scene: The newsroom in The Post newspaper

Arnold Tutu: I am in the post newspaper newsroom in Lusaka – Zambia.....
The Post produces a weekly health column which focuses mainly on HIV and AIDS issues. The columnist is Manasseh Phiri, a medical doctor from the Centre for Infectious Disease Research CIDRZ.

Dr Phiri: There wasn't anywhere in the media where things were being explained to people in a very very simple way that they would understand. It is not any use writing articles with complicated medical words and expecting that people understand. They will just read one or two paragraphs and stop. So yes I think it is very important to explain the science to explain the evidence to the ordinary people.

Arnold Tutu: Among the research subjects covered is one that is one that the medical establishment is now pushing on to the agenda - male circumcision - where a man has his foreskin removed. Researchers strongly believe this reduces his risk of contracting the HIV virus.

Dr Phiri: The WHO has made very strong recommendations for the promotion of male circumcision as an extra HIV prevention strategy. The evidence is there and it has to be explained to people, which I see as the role of my column. The media is probably the most

powerful instrument that we have to be able to disseminate research so that ordinary people understand.

Arnold Tutu: Criticism has appeared in newspapers in other countries including Uganda that health agencies are rushing to promote circumcision for HIV without knowing whether the full message is getting through. Eugene Phiri got circumcised on 1st September 2008.

Phiri: Each time I wake up in the morning I look at myself and say like what took me so long? Eugene what took you so long? If I were to sleep with a woman, I will tell you the truth, I will make sure that I am going to use a condom. The best protection is a condom. What the media needs to do right now is to tell the public to say you've been circumcised quite alright, clean hygienic blah blah blah but it doesn't mean that you're not going to get HIV AIDS. If this is not addressed everybody's going to get circumcised and start sleeping with women without using condoms.

Arnold Tutu: I asked Dr Kanyanta Sunkutu, World Health Organisation HIV and AIDS advisor, how sure he is that people understand the full prevention message.

Dr Kanyanta Sunkutu: I hope so. The messages that we take out there attempt to show that more circumcision of itself is not the magic bullet. It would be dangerous to let people believe that male circumcision is a permanent condom, it is not. It is a method that is very very useful. Very protective but it has to be done in combination with other preventive methods.

Arnold Tutu: Are there misunderstandings as a result of media stories, for example, do people understand that the research only relates to female to male transmission and does not necessarily protect women but only reduce the risk?

Dr. Sunkutu: That I think has been understood, the fact that this is protection for the man. The research agenda is still being looked at to see how male circumcision relates to women and we will have some information pretty soon.

Arnold Tutu: The University Teaching Hospital conducts about 300 male circumcisions every month. Men usually wait about a month in order to have their foreskins removed while others opt to have the surgery done in private clinics at a higher cost. I asked Dr Phiri if we have enough outlets for male circumcision to meet the growing demand.

Phiri: We just do not have enough outlets for circumcision and we are going to have to do that and very very quickly. The danger in not having enough outlets where these can be provided in a safe and hygienic outlets and by people who are properly trained is that very soon you will have emergence of quack circumcisers where people look at the demand and then decide that they are going to provide this service themselves and that is very, very dangerous.

Arnold Tutu: Dr. Sunkutu, is it wise to promote the research through the popular media in a high HIV prevalence country like Zambia, without having enough capacity to provide the operations?

Dr Sunkutu: I still think so because when you see an increased demand, you increase the services you are providing. I think we need to promote it in the popular media but make sure that we're promoting the correct message... we are not misleading people to say it is a permanent condom but we are telling them that it is a very, very protective thing for as long as it is done in addition to other things and the media has a big role to play in that.

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