

Importance of Public Education in Reducing the Burden of HIV/AIDS

Public health education is important in promoting health behavior and preventing disease. Since the 1980s, the incidence of HIV/AIDS has decreased due to successful public health campaigns that have focused on changing behavior in order to prevent the transmission of disease.¹ Recently, media campaigns have played a significant role in increasing awareness about HIV/AIDS and getting tested, two factors important in preventing the spread of HIV. Specifically, public education of HIV/AIDS is a powerful tool in reducing the disease burden as it provides information to individuals about the disease, how it is transmitted, how they can take precautionary measures to help prevent the transmission of HIV, and what steps to take if they suspect that they've contracted the disease.

Public health education emphasizes the concept of "self-empowerment" since it informs individuals about the importance of prevention and safe behaviors to prevent the infection and transmission of HIV. In addition to creating the opportunity to empower individuals, public health education can create a hopeful outlook on a disease that was once considered absolute. HIV/AIDS education can help develop standards of behavior that create a positive state of body, mind and spirit.² Individuals can strengthen their ability to cope with the disease and take initiative to adhere to the treatments outlined in their disease management program.

Poor health literacy has been associated with poor health and negative treatment outcomes.³ Being able to understand the medical treatments is crucial for treatment adherence, especially for individuals with HIV/AIDS, whose treatments can seem complicated if not explained properly by their physician. Furthermore, poor personal knowledge and understanding of health issues is also a result of poor health literacy. One study found that poor health literacy was associated with lower adherence to anti-HIV medication regimens and functioning of the immune system.⁴ Literacy can pose as a long-term barrier in proper treatment adherence, which is why public health education must also gauge the level of understanding of the audience before delivering information. In sum, public health education plays an important role in reducing the burden of HIV/AIDS by increasing health literacy and creating opportunities for prevention and better disease management.

Sources:

¹Nutbeam D. (2006). Health Literacy as a public health goal: a challenge for contemporary health education and communication strategies into the 21st century. *Health Promotion International*, 15(3):259-267.

²Kelly MJ. (1999). What HIV/AIDS Can Do To Education, and What Education Can Do To HIV/AIDS. Presented at All Sub-Saharan Africa Conference on Education for All.

³Williams MV, Parket RM, Baker DW, et al. (1995). Inadequate functional health literacy among patients at two public hospitals. *JAMA*, 274:1677-1682.

⁴Kalichman SC, Ramachandran B, Catz S. (1999). Adherence to combination antiretroviral therapies in HIV patients of low health literacy. *J Gen Int Med*, 14:267-273.



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