

# The right to choose

Tact and respect should be favoured over a didactic approach to spreading the HIV and Aids message

## Comment

**T**he challenge posed to society of communicating effectively about HIV and Aids is that it should not be seen as bombarding others with messages intended to direct their behaviour. Any "success" gained by this strategy would merely be the success of propaganda. Rather, what is required is to provide people with true freedom of choice.

An effective communication strategy regarding HIV and Aids requires that we first answer certain existential questions. The communication strategies that we use should focus on giving the individual the ability to act with choice within his or her world of limited options.

This is not to say that we shouldn't be communicating about HIV and Aids. But I have an issue with how Africans have been stereotyped as collectivists for whom questions of existence are somehow beyond the realm of understanding. I also have an issue with the propagandist approach that undermines democracy by suggesting that the individual can be easily led in whatever direction communicators choose.

But we have moved from the industrial age to the information age, in which people are increasingly subjected to a barrage of information that undermines the ability of whole populations to act with authenticity. Real communication has been reduced to mere propaganda, with real experience being sidelined as information-driven and mediated practices take preference.

According to conventional wisdom, communication about HIV and Aids aims to direct the choices of the public.

This has been done in the name of "informing" the adoption of healthy attitudes and behaviours. But because this kind of communication tends to limit and control people, it calls into question whether it can meaningfully recognise the individual. This question is particularly important in the African context,



**TAC members on a protest march in Cape Town. 'Communicators on HIV/Aids have a role to play in enabling, affirming and supporting individuals to create new realities for themselves,' the author writes. Photo: David Harrison**

where the rights of individuals have been historically denied in practices of racism, colonialism and apartheid.

If communicators adopted tactful approaches to communicating they would give recognition and respect to the individuals for whom the messages are intended. Whatever strategy we adopt should assist people to make mature choices that do not avoid existential questions, such as those about responsibility and self-identity.

For better or for worse, we cannot limit or control the choices of others. In the face of limited options, the individual still needs to make

**"Whatever HIV and Aids strategy we adopt should assist people in making mature choices"**

a choice. That there are limits attached to options in a given context does not necessarily diminish the range of possibilities open to an individual.

Africans have continued to show diverse responses to what is, in effect, the same information about HIV and Aids.

The ability of people to process information and then act upon it should go hand in hand with the understanding that they freedom of choice. Without this assumption, there is no logic in telling people to abstain, be faithful and condomise.

We need to help those who are starting to question the world to recognise their ability to create new realities for themselves. Communicators on HIV/Aids have a role to play in enabling, affirming and supporting individuals in reaching for this goal. Communicators, as midwives of intellectual maturity, need to have the tact to act with the

respect required. They need to honour the dignity of people as individuals who have choice and freedom.

Even in the darkest of times, we can go beyond objective answers and propaganda by embracing the real questions through which individuals can find their own truths.

As we advance in using communications to allow others to adopt healthy lifestyles, we should not lose sight of how it may be that our communication is interpreted differently from what our best intentions may have pictured.

Beyond seeking to control and direct and, through this, to deny people their right to choose freely, we can choose to recognise the dignity of all humanity when we communicate about HIV and Aids.

Beyond propaganda, it is possible to deliver education by using communication strategies that enable people to question and therefore choose their own path.

In this historic time we would be negligent if, in addressing HIV and Aids, we do not empower ourselves to move forward in the quest for meaningful recognition of the individual.

In this African context, the adoption of approaches to HIV and Aids that challenge individuals to speak and, through this, humanise one another, is a worthy heritage.

When we find the dignity in one another, we shall have said "no more" to the denial of humanity that has characterised our past. This denial still characterises much of our experience of HIV/Aids.

*This is an edited version of an address that Dr Colin Chasi gave at a University of Johannesburg sociology, anthropology and development studies seminar (details at [www.uj.ac.za/sociology](http://www.uj.ac.za/sociology)) on February 24. He is senior lecturer in the school of arts at Monash South Africa*