

## **Reviewer's report**

**Title:** Empowering the people: Development of an HIV peer education model for low-literacy rural communities in India

**Version:** 1 **Date:** 12 January 2008

**Reviewer:** Arthur J Ammann

### **Reviewer's report:**

Comments for authors

#### 1- Minor revisions

This is a multi-authored manuscript relating to HIV education and training performed in a low literacy region of India. The period covered extends from January to December in the year 2005. Included in the evaluation are six NGOs who developed a peer education model for rural communities. The program trained 20 NGO field staff, 102 women's self health group leaders and 52 barbers to become peer educators. Educational material that was developed included cartoon based ministrations for low literacy populations. Street theater and cultural programs highlighted issues that specifically related to HIV and stigma in the community.

The authors estimate that the program reached over 30,000 villagers. Utilizing greater than 2000 interactive HIV awareness programs the outreach workers involved in the model distributed 62,000 educational materials, 69,000 condoms and referred almost 3000 individuals for services including VCT and HIV support. Over 100 individuals were newly diagnosed as having HIV infection. 129 individuals with HIV infection were referred to a government hospital for additional treatment and care.

Overall the manuscript contains an excellent description of the program specifically designed for low literacy areas to convey a message regarding HIV prevention and management.

#### 2- Essential Revisions

Since the manuscript was submitted there has been controversy regarding the actual number of HIV infections in India. The authors state that, "despite increased efforts in recent years, the HIV epidemic in India is not contained." Recent data indicates that the number of HIV-infected individuals in India is 50% less than that estimated by the WHO. While this manuscript is not about the numbers on all HIV infections this is an important correction it should be made. Additionally the authors state that 60% of HIV infections in India are from rural

areas. How does this number relate to revised estimates of HIV infection?

The demographic description of the community involved is excellent and provides a good background to the target population. In the section on development of educational materials, the term "Kama Sutra" is utilized. This should be explained for audiences who are not familiar with national terminology.

The selection of the various categories of individuals trained seems obvious except for the barbers. This seems to be an outlying group and perhaps more explanation is required as to why this group was specifically targeted

A significant number of women dropped out during the training program. What were the reasons?

Was there directly observed training for the voluntary counseling and testing as it into to the targeted community?

The results section is comprehensive but too long. The inclusion of direct quotes while of interest is somewhat arduous. It would be best to summarize the key points of the comments that were received and the educational observations. The format of the results section requires tight organization. The author should concentrate on a more succinct approach to summarizing their results.

In the discussion section the authors state that the previous search for education materials resulted in difficult to understand, incomplete or too medically oriented approaches. How did they identify the material that they reviewed and how extensive was their search.

Overall the manuscript is a comprehensive review of a peer education model that was effectively used in a population of individuals that were not highly literate. It is a thorough evaluation of their techniques and education material. To improve the manuscript the results section needs to be condensed and the discussion section should include recommendations for future model programs. An additional point to consider - one technique that is utilized in many manuscripts is to define the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

**What next?:** Accept after minor essential revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a

statistician.