Signing Bonus

A comic brings HIV ed to the deaf community

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It’s not a typical cartoon: Four deaf high school friends, gay and straight, confront the issue of safer sex and a sexually abusive teacher. *Are Your Rights Respected*, released by South Africa’s Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) in August, is the nation’s first comic book to use splashy illustrations and sign language captions to inform deaf youth about HIV and sexual empowerment. GALA plans to get thousands of copies into deaf education programs nationwide. “HIV stigma is even worse in the deaf community,” says Ruth Morgan, GALA’s director. She adds that the only openly HIV positive deaf person she knows of in all of South Africa is a GALA employee and that the lack of HIV info targeted at the community exacerbates the stigma.

There are more than 70 million hearing-impaired people worldwide, but few studies consider them a cultural group, so researchers lack precise HIV stats. However, experts believe their infection rate is as high or higher than among hearing people in most nations. Interpreters know little about HIV, and the average deaf high school grad reads print at a fifth-grade level. “When you give most American deaf people an HIV brochure written in English, it might as well be in Russian or Korean,” says Harry Vrenna, from Connecticut’s Commission on the Deaf and Hearing Impaired, who says his org is giving interpreters an HIV education. The message is heard loud and clear.

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