Lost in Translation

As the incidence of HIV/AIDS increases in the Latino community, why isn't media coverage keeping pace?

September 1, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

On May 7, an article titled "Blacks More Worried About HIV Than Whites" by George E. Curry, a well-known African-American journalist, appeared in the *New Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the oldest black newspapers in the country.

The article explained the findings of a 2009 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation that revealed the level of concern about HIV/AIDS in different communities. The report found black people are six times more likely to be very concerned about getting HIV than white people and that 38 percent of black people were very concerned about getting HIV. The report also found that 25 percent of Latinos were very concerned about getting HIV.

The article described in detail the opinions of blacks and whites but included only a few mentions about Latinos. This kind of media coverage is typical when it comes to Latinos and HIV/AIDS. Latinos shouldn't have to read between the lines of media coverage to receive the information they need about the virus.

Media coverage is a critical tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS. It can help educate people about the disease, and by doing so it can help reduce the stigma associated with it and inspire people to get tested and linked to care. Poor media coverage impedes awareness efforts and can therefore lead to further spread of the virus. Increasing media coverage on Latinos and HIV/AIDS could help the community stay virus-free.

In the epidemic's early years, the media's domestic coverage of HIV/AIDS was substantial. Today, the coverage has waned, and it focuses primarily on AIDS in the African-American community. That focus is deserved. Comprising half of all new HIV infections and half of all AIDS cases, the black community is by far the most affected by HIV.

However, Latinos are also at significant risk. In 2006, Latinos were 15 percent of the U.S. population, but represented 17 percent of all new HIV infections and 19 percent of all new AIDS cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Latino community is the second-most affected ethnic group. Today's media coverage does not reflect this reality.

Even from the beginning of the U.S. epidemic, the media have seen HIV mostly through a black and white lens. Initially, the media told the story of HIV by comparing gay white men with Haitians. At the time, that comparison was understandable since those two groups had been identified as high risk.

Starting in the mid-1990s though, as HIV increasingly became more prevalent among African Americans, the media coverage shifted to focus on that community. As we watch new infection rates rise among Latinos, we wonder why the mainstream Latino media are not accurately tracing the epidemic's next target.

Latino newspapers seem a bit better at delivering HIV/AIDS information than Latino magazines. An example is *Latina*, a bilingual lifestyle magazine for Latinas. As we went to press, a search on its website, Latina.com, listed only 17 stories that mention HIV and 31 stories that mention AIDS in the past year.

On the surface, that seems like decent coverage. Until you realize that most of those stories didn't provide education on the disease. Most were about celebrities raising funds to fight HIV/AIDS. One article was about a report from the Latino Commission on AIDS, but none profiled a Latina living with HIV.

Coverage from broadcasters has been mixed. The Hispanic Information and Telecommunications Network, an online news outlet, airs a political talk show titled *Destination Casa Blanca* (Spanish for White House) hosted by Ray Suarez, a well-known Latino journalist. He ran a series of shows in June 2008 about HIV/AIDS in the Latino community. The shows discussed stigma, Latinas, youth and seniors. Homophobia was mentioned, but not emphasized. While the content was better than in print, the audience it reached was relatively small.

In comparison, in 2008, CNN produced a series titled *Black in America* that included coverage of HIV/AIDS in the black community. As we went to press, CNN was scheduled to air *Latino in America* in October. We hope it includes coverage of HIV/AIDS.

The fact that this issue of POZ features a Latina on the cover (read Luz's story here) is an indication that we—as all media outlets should—are attempting to fairly represent the diversity of the face of HIV/AIDS and to tell the truth about who is affected—before it's too late for others.

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