Taking Black AIDS Awareness Viral

Can the Web curb new HIV infections among African Americans?

June 17, 2009 By Kat Noel

As part of New York's Internet Week, June 1 through 8, TheLoop21.com, an online news source and digital community for African Americans, invited various people within media to take part in a panel discussion titled "The Silent Killer: AIDS in Black America." The goal was to address the impact the epidemic has had on the African-American community and to promote the Internet—from niche news sites to blogs to burgeoning communities such as Facebook and Twitter—as an HIV education tool.

According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report released last year, African Americans make up just 13 percent of the U.S. population but account for 45 percent of the country's new HIV infections each year. AIDS is the third leading cause of death of African-American females ages 35 to 44 and the fourth leading cause of African-American males ages 25 to 44.

At the panel, K. Aletha Maybank, MD, MPH, assistant commissioner in New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, highlighted that AIDS is the No. 1 cause of death of African-American women between the ages of 25 to 34 and that there has also been an increase in the rate of infection among those older than 50.

"There are a lot of stats, and the picture does point to black America, but it's important that everyone pays attention to it because it's really going to take the entire U.S. [and] the entire world to focus on this issue in order to help eradicate it," said Maybank. "It's really disappointing when we have death rates that are so high, because there really is treatment out there that can sustain and maintain life for a long time."

Acknowledging that more Americans are turning to the Internet for information and support when confronted with a problem, TheLoop21.com is encouraging bloggers to link to online HIV resources and to host discussions about the epidemic on their blogs as part of two weeklong national initiatives on June 21–27 and July 19–25. The TheLoop21.com organized the panel in the hopes that by taking the imperative dialogue online, where anonymity is possible, blacks will be more vocal about the effects of the epidemic and will research how to prevent it from further spreading.

During the panel discussion, Kenya Hunt, senior editor of *Essence*, revealed for the first time

publicly that last year she was personally affected by the black community's silence around HIV when her 44-year-old brother died from an AIDS-related illness. She had noticed his deteriorating health, Hunt recalled, but was originally told he passed away from meningitis.

After his death, Hunt's sister-in-law finally admitted that her husband was HIV positive and had asked that his HIV status remain hidden from family members out of fear of judgment.

"The first thing that speaks to me is that we need to encourage more dialogue," Hunt said. "Women have to be more aggressive and say to their men, 'Let's go get tested together.' It definitely starts with you first. We're independent women, we're hustlers, so why is it so difficult to say to our mate, 'This is what I need from you'?"

Terrence Dean, founder and creator of Men's Empowerment and author of *Hiding in Hip-Hop: On the Down Low in the Entertainment Industry From Music to Hollywood*, said people are reluctant to discuss the reality of HIV because it is predominantly transmitted through sex and intravenous drug use—taboo topics within the black community. Although he acknowledged that men who identify as heterosexual but secretly have sex with other men (often referred to as being "on the down low") might contribute to the rising number of infections among blacks, he emphasized that "this is not a 'gay disease,' anyone can get this disease."

"If you're only worried about if someone has had sex with another man, they could have unprotected sex with a whole bunch of women but you didn't ask that question," added Sonya Lockett, vice president of public affairs at Black Entertainment Television (BET) Networks. "That may be where you actually get infected."

While the black church is often seen as a mobilizing force within the community, Dean notes that many of African-American religious leaders have been reluctant to take on HIV. "TD Jakes said something very powerful—'There's not a scripture in the Bible that talks about how to deal with AIDS,'" Dean said. "He was right. They don't know how to deal with it, so we can't put the responsibility on them."

Chuck Creekmur, cofounder and co-CEO of AllHipHop.com, believes that the fight against the epidemic starts with African Americans taking personal accountability for themselves and the people around them. "If you look at the statistics, you'll lose hope," Creekmur said. "You have to make it a little smaller so people can conceptualize how they affect the change. "

Tweet that.

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