

How even the best papers still misreport HIV & AIDS (guest-blog)

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This article is by the new POLIS Silverstone Scholar Marco Scalvini.

The media play the important role of informing the public about what it means to live with HIV today. But journalists need to report about HIV with a more accurate language.

For example, despite the fact that AIDS and HIV are two of the world's most recognized acronyms, journalists still tend to confuse the terms. HIV is a virus detected by a blood test. AIDS is the late stage of HIV infection, when a person's immune system is damaged severely. Thus, HIV may result in AIDS, but having HIV does not mean a person has AIDS.

This distinction is very important for those living with HIV, because they need to be reassured about the good chances of slowing disease progression and extending life. In fact, medical treatment can reduce HIV infection in many cases to a survivable chronic condition, analogous to diabetes. This, in turn, helps to slow or stop the progression of HIV disease and prevent the destruction of the immune system by AIDS.

How the media cover HIV and AIDS issues

On 24 November, I was shocked to read in the [New York Times](#): “33 million people infected with the AIDS virus are on antiretroviral drugs.”

There is no “**AIDS virus**”. Moreover, no one can be “**infected**” with AIDS, because it is not an infectious agent.

The virus associated with AIDS is called the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV, and it was first isolated in 1983. As a consequence, I tried to determine on the Factiva database how common this mistake is, and I have discovered that the New York Times wrote “AIDS virus” 22 times in the last 12 months and 458 times in the last 10 years.

The situation is slightly different in the UK. For example, The Guardian has showed an increasing sensibility to this issue. Though it wrote “AIDS Virus” 21 times in 2008, in the last 12 months the mistake has been repeated only 11 times — but often in a quote. This means that the error is very common not only among journalists.

How many times the New York Times and the Guardian have repeated the term AIDS “Virus” in the last ten years:

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Another very important question relates to the use of terms such as “**AIDS victims**” or “**AIDS sufferers**”, labels that imply the individuals are powerless, with no control over their lives. Unfortunately, journalists do not respect these considerations despite the fact that it can be seen as reasonable common sense.

The New York Times, for example, has reported either AIDS “sufferer” or “victims” 119 times in the last ten years. The Guardian has almost doubled the hits: 225.

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Finding the right words

There is increased consensus about the appropriate terminology when reporting on HIV, and it is important to know what terms to avoid. For example, UNAIDS has published a Terminology Guide – also known as its [‘Editors’ Notes For Authors](#):

One good suggestion is to avoid the construction “HIV/AIDS” because they are not synonymous; “HIV and AIDS” is preferable.

Another important suggestion based on the substantial difference between AIDS (disease) and HIV (virus) is to avoid terms that are extremely misleading: “AIDS test,” “transmitting AIDS.” One should write “AIDS diagnosis” because AIDS is a medical diagnosis made by a doctor based on specific criteria.

Since the HIV acronym already contains the word virus, “virus” in the phrase “HIV virus” is redundant. Just “HIV” is enough.

Another suggestion is to avoid words such as “transmitting” and “infected by” HIV. The appropriate phrase is “acquiring HIV”.

Finally, instead of labelling people as “victims” or “sufferers”, the suggestion is to use “people living with HIV” (PLHIV), because this reflects the fact that an infected person may continue to live well and be productive for many years.

Avoiding stigma

As language shapes beliefs and may influence behaviours, journalists and media operators should recognize that appropriate language has the power to strengthen the response to HIV and AIDS. The wrong wording can only increase discrimination against people who have tested positive for HIV. Moreover, the stigma can discourage people at risk from accessing care, including testing for HIV.

After nearly 30 years of the epidemic, there is still a need for media training and sensitization in order to have more balanced and accurate reporting on HIV and AIDS.

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