

# Involving journalists into HIV issues

Reuters Foundation ([www.foundation.reuters.com](http://www.foundation.reuters.com)), the training, education and humanitarian trust owned by Reuters the global news and information group, brought 22 journalists from around the world to meet face-to-face with renowned health experts in a five-day workshop from November 7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>, held in New York. The workshop examined reporting challenges and a range of global HIV/AIDS issues. This was the third workshop of its kind; previous ones were held in South Africa (2003) and Brazil last year.

The journalists, who came mostly from developing countries in all the continents, write on development issues, health and HIV/AIDS. The distinguished speakers included Dr Seth Berkley, founder and CEO of the International Aids Vaccine Initiative (IAVI), Prof Jeffrey Sachs, the leading development economist and Director of the Millennium Project, Dr Wafaa El-Sadr, Director of the International Centre for AIDS Care and Treatment Programmes at Columbia University and Zackie Achmat, the HIV-positive campaigner from South Africa.

The workshop provided time for participating journalists to interact with each other and exchange information about the rapidly spreading infection within their own regions. Many journalists made presentations on the HIV/AIDS scenario in their countries and made comparisons with the situation in other countries. Every interaction with a guest speaker boiled down to reporting exercises and a newsroom situation. Possible story ideas were discussed and reports were written every day. The participants also wrote an editorial on US watchdog, Food and Drugs Administration (FDA), which is currently debating allowing a home-testing kit that will allow people to test themselves for an HIV infection.



A highlight of the workshop was a high-powered panel discussion on the theme 'Combating HIV/AIDS – Does it take more than money?' It featured Zackie Achmat; Laurie Garrett, a Pulitzer Prize winning medical writer; Paul De Lay, Director of Monitoring and Evaluation at UNAIDS; Raymond Gilmartin, former Merck Chairman and CEO and Dr Mark Dybul, the deputy head and Chief Medical Officer of the Office of the US Global AIDS Coordinator. Debate covered a wide range including the US government's global policies of ABC (Abstinence, Be-faithful and use Condoms), the leadership crisis in tackling the HIV epidemic in many countries and the pricing of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs.

The panel looked at ways of stemming the brain drain of doctors and nurses from Africa to Western countries. Provision of free ARVs to the poor was also discussed at length. India, Russia and China all came in for criticism over their response to the high rates of HIV infection in their regions. The failure of the World Health Organisation

(WHO) to meet its 3 by 5 pledge to provide free ARVs to three million people by the end of 2005 was also raised when Dr De Lay said they were only half-way there.

A media panel of American medical writers and science journalists also discussed making HIV/AIDS news stories passionate. One suggestion that came out was to provide more coverage to people who have the courage to tell the world that they have HIV. The interactions with resource persons from different backgrounds also provided journalists with a number of story ideas on HIV/AIDS that they plan to pursue later. The workshop also provided the opportunity for journalists to look at HIV/AIDS from a global perspective and its relationship with many other seemingly unlike issues like free trade, religion and international aid policies. ■

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