

Education slowing AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa

March 22 2009

Increased schooling across sub-Saharan Africa may be lowering new HIV infections among younger adults, according to sociologists, suggesting a shift in a decades-long trend where formal education is considered an AIDS risk factor.

During the early stages of the [HIV](#) pandemic in the region, the [disease](#) passed unnoticed amidst the onslaught of other infections. When scientists took a closer look at the deadly new disease, they found that more often males with a higher than average [education](#) were contracting the disease.

Baker and his Penn State colleagues John Collins and Juan Leon, both graduate students, believe that information about [AIDS](#) that was already percolating in wealthier countries did not get to sub-Saharan Africa until the mid 1990s. AIDS was seen as a homosexual, urban disease and either neglect or active misinformation campaigns in some African countries ensured that the preventative effects of education never took root. But among younger people in the region, formal education is emerging as a major preventative factor against new infections. They report their findings in the current issue of the UNESCO journal Prospects.

To find what has happened recently to the link between formal education and HIV infections, the researchers analyzed data from surveys previously undertaken in 11 countries across the region between 2003 and 2005. They specifically looked at males ages 15 to 24, 25 to 34, and older than 35.

The researchers argued that because the youngest members of the oldest group -- the 35 and older -- became sexually mature in the late 1980s, when there was little or no information about AIDS, higher education would show as a risk factor instead of a social vaccine.

"At 24 years, the oldest member of this young group reached sexual maturity in the mid 1990s, when there was already widespread knowledge that HIV and AIDS could be contracted through [unprotected sex](#) and intravenous drug use," explained Baker.

"More educated people have the cognitive tools to make better sense out of facts presented to them," explained Baker. "We have shown that when there is sufficient information, and no misinformation, people with education adopt healthy strategies to avoid infections."

According to Baker, AIDS is a complicated disease and it can only be tackled effectively by providing people with an everyday, accurate working theory of how the disease is transmitted. "We are telling the governments that increased literacy is an explicit prevention strategy against HIV because it will help stop pandemics," he said.

"The kind of information being supplied by NGOs is scandalous because it is so simplistic and minimalist, particularly for low-educated people, that they are not going to figure this disease out in time to prevent their own infection," Baker added.

Source: Pennsylvania State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Education slowing AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa (2009, March 22) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-03-aids-sub-saharan-africa.html>

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