Disability and inclusion - HIV, sexual health and disability in Zimbabwe

(**http://www.healthlink.org.uk/projects/disability/hiv_partners.html**)

Overview:

Healthlink Worldwide and the Family AIDS Caring Trust (FACT) have worked together to understand how HIV affects disabled people in Zimbabwe.

Over six months in 2003, disabled people shared their opinions and experience of sexual health and HIV through a series of focus group discussions, which were organised by FACT and the National Council of Disabled People in Zimbabwe (NCDPZ).

The discussions took place in the area surrounding Mutare in Eastern Zimbabwe where FACT and NCDPZ are based.

As well as highlighting the high levels of poverty that disabled people in Zimbabwe live with, the discussion participants said that they lack information about HIV and sexual health.

Disabled people are often isolated within their communities due to the stigma that surrounds disability. HIV prevention programmes tend to exclude disabled people as their families, carers and service providers do not perceive them to be sexually active. The discussions showed that this perception needs to be challenged. In addition, disabled people are vulnerable to sexual abuse and rape, leaving them at greater risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Most of us have questions and concerns about our sexuality and sexual behaviour, but it can be harder for disabled people to talk to people about this: friends, family and carers often focus on physical needs rather than emotional and sexual needs. However most of the people involved in the discussions said that they would prefer to get information about HIV and sexual health from their friends and peers.

Sometimes the nature of a particular disability makes it difficult for people to access information. Following the discussions, FACT and NCPDZ recommended producing information about HIV in a variety of formats. For example, Braille information could be produced for partially sighted people.

FACT and NCPDZ are currently working together on life skills training with the people who participated in the focus groups. The training uses the Stepping Stones methodology and covers gender and relationships, violence, coping with grief, HIV and sexual health. It aims to empower participants by encouraging them to reflect on their own lived experiences in relation to these issues, and to develop self-esteem and assertiveness. Sessions are reflective but also creative, as participants are encouraged to respond to the challenges around them.

This project shows the value of combining different skills and experience in order to understand the needs of disabled people. NCPDZ has brought experience of representing disabled people, and FACT has contributed expertise on HIV and sexual health. FACT and NCPDZ will continue to work together.

Partners

The HIV, sexual health and disability in Zimbabwe project was completed in partnership with the Family AIDS Caring Trust (FACT), Zimbabwe.

A Christian-based organisation working with various communities in Manicaland and throughout Zimbabwe, FACT provides HIV prevention programmes, training and care for people living with HIV and AIDS.

FACT aims to become a renowned organisation working towards the elimination and mitigation of the impact of HIV and AIDS. To achieve this vision, FACT facilitates the formation and builds the capacity of community based organisations in Zimbabwe and in the Southern African region.

FACT has approximately 1000 volunteers, built up since 1987 when the organisation started. Its large volunteer base and emphasis on developing community ownership of programmes ensures the sustainability and continuity of its work.

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