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AIDS : Thai Press Learns To Cope

By

Wee Soo Cheang
Until about seven years ago, the Thai press generally paid scant attention to the problem of Aids. What coverage there was, was confined to the odd news story about the spread of the disease worldwide, and the discovery of a few cases in Thailand.

The first of these was diagnosed in early 1985 in a Thai man who was thought to have contracted the disease abroad. Aids is thought to have spread in Thailand initially through intravenous drug users and the homosexual community - two communities that the press, and the general public, regarded as isolated groups with little influence on the social mainstream.

But even after the disease had infiltrated into the general community, the media was slow to focus on Aids as an issue.

The first concerted press coverage of an Aids case, which has more or less become etched into the public's consciousness, is that of a 48-year-old security guard named Cha-on, who contracted the disease after a blood transfusion, and lost his job as a result.

This case, because it involved an average, working-class citizen who got the disease through no "misbehaviour" on his part, aroused the press and the public's interest enough to keep it in the news for a few weeks in Sept-Oct 1987.

There appeared a series of news and feature stories in both the English- and Thai-language press, highlighting his plight and that of his wife and children, who depended on him for support.

But the press noticed his case only after it was publicized by anti-Aids campaigners such as Sommart Troy and Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen, who had for some time been trying hard to draw the public's attention to the problem of Aids.

The coverage of Cha-on's case did, however, serve to wake up the press and the public to the Aids issue and a spate of stories appeared in its wake. During the latter half of 1987, two Aids-related issues were highlighted by the press. One was a proposed law to test foreigners for Aids as they arrived in Thailand. The other was an apparent policy decision by the authorities not to allow Aids-infected prisoners to be granted amnesty or parole.

Needless to say, the Aids-testing law was never passed and the no-amnesty policy was never implemented - at least, not officially.

Over the next few years, press coverage of Aids continued intermittently. But the growing extent of the Aids epidemic in Thailand ensured the disease could no longer be
ignored as an issue, even if press reports tended to be inconsistent and, all too often, filled with hyperbole.

Following is a list of some of the Aids-related topics covered by the English-language Thai press from the latter half of 1992 until last month. The list is casual and by no means complete. It is meant only to give some idea of kind of topics the press chose to highlight:

- Compulsory Aids testing for sex workers (Sept 1992)
- Confinement of Aids patients in special Aids centres (Dec 1992)
- Feature story on long-distance truck drivers being prone to Aids (Nation, Sept 1992)
- Aids threatens expectant mothers (Nov 1992)
- HTLV1 virus discovered in Thailand (Nov 1992)
- Mechai Viravaidya drinks from Aids patient's cup (Dec 1, 1992, World Aids Day)
- Chiang Rai Aids cases to reach 22,000 soon (Post, Dec 15, 1992)
- Aids committee restructured (Nation, Jan 21, 22, 1993)
- Debate over Aids vaccine tests (Nation, Jan 27, 1993)
- Aids cases double to 869 in 1992 (Post, Feb 1, 1993)
- Police recommend law to enforce condom use (Post, Feb 12, 1993)
- Companies secretly test employees for Aids (Nation, Feb 17, 1993)
- Health Ministry launches Aids phone-in service (Post, Mar 16, 1993)
- Aids cases increasing among housewives (Post, Jun 23, 1993)
- Aids in north getting worse (Post, Jun 24, 1993)
- Aids surveillance system in Thailand draws praise (Nation, Jul 10, 1993)
- 991 die of Aids (Post, Aug 23, 1993)
- False Aids test results (Nation, Sept 7, 1993)
- Teenagers, housewives among highest Aids risk groups (Nation, Oct 6, 1993)
- Aids infection rate slows down (Nation, Dec 28, 1993)
- More than 1 million HIV patients in Thailand (Nation, Apr 22, 1994)
- Aids will affect children in many ways (Nation, May 31, 1994)
- Aids vaccine trials begin (Nation, Jun 6, 1994)
- Aids vaccine tests to be halted (Post, Jun 23, 1994)
- Vaccine tests to continue (Nation, Jun 30)
- Three Thais die of Aids every hour (Nation, Jul 23, 1994)
- Aids and its economic consequences (Nation, Jul 26, 1994)

In general, press coverage of Aids has been increasing (most newspapers carry at least two or three Aids-related stories per week) and becoming more diverse over the last few
years - Thai journalists, like everyone else who learns from experience, have become more informed about the disease and more sophisticated in their attitude towards it.

Still, this does not mean Thai press coverage of Aids is now excellent - or even adequate. Many journalists themselves believe much more can and needs to be done in terms of improving coverage of this issue.

There remains a tendency to cover it superficially, even in feature stories. There are relatively few stories examining the social issues related to Aids, such as the consequences of an increasing number of children whose parents die of the disease.

Or what sort of emotional support can be offered to Aids patients and their relatives.

Having said that, a number of recent Aids stories (in the English-language press at least), have discussed the concept of community care for Aids patients - that is, developing and supporting community-care services so that patients can remain at home even in the later stages of the disease, rather than being warded in hospitals.

There are several arguments to support this concept:

* As the number of Aids patients increases, hospital beds will become scarce and alternative solutions need to be found.

* Many patients would prefer to remain at home rather than in an impersonal hospital ward, even until death.

* By keeping patients at home, relatives and other members of the community may learn about the reality of Aids and, hopefully, become more compassionate towards its victims.

Stories like these show that the press is learning to probe deeper into the issue, to go beyond the statistics and case studies meant mainly to shock or excite its readers, and to develop a more rational and humane approach to the issue.

The other side of the question of how effective Thai press coverage of Aids is, concerns readership. Do press stories on Aids get read, and who reads them?

The short answer is "probably not enough people". Experts on Thai culture and society have often stated that Thais are an oral rather than a literary society - in other words, Thais do not generally read books, magazines or newspapers.

It is debatable how true this is. A more established fact, however, is that newspapers in Thailand are not distributed very efficiently. They frequently do not reach large rural areas of the country where a significant number of the population lives.

It has also been said that Thai newspapers are not aimed at the grassroots level but at the business and academic communities. However influential these communities may be economically and politically, they nevertheless represent a minority of the Thai population.
It is probable, therefore, that press coverage on Aids or any other subject, has had a limited influence on changing social attitudes.

By comparison, radio and especially television, reach a much broader cross-section of Thais and are ergo much more influential.

Interestingly, radio and television initially lagged far behind newspapers in their coverage of Aids. This was probably because privately-owned Thai newspapers have always enjoyed more freedom than state-owned radio and television.

In the initial stages of the Aids epidemic in Thailand, the government was at best ambivalent about how it should handle the crisis. In the last few years, that has changed and the government now pursues a very aggressive Aids education policy.

Consequently, Thai radio and television have been running some excellent Aids education programmes and commercials which do undoubtedly reach the grassroots of Thai society.

Wee Soo Cheang is a staff writer with The Nation newspaper, and has had more than 10 years' experience covering social issues in Thailand, including Aids.