

# Is fear the future of HIV prevention?

Dr Adam Bourne, Sigma Research

London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

[Adam.bourne@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:Adam.bourne@lshtm.ac.uk)

***Sigma***  
RESEARCH

LONDON  
SCHOOL of  
HYGIENE  
& TROPICAL  
MEDICINE



# Overview

1. Consider effectiveness of fear-based campaigns
2. Describe consequences of arousing fear
3. Discuss reasons for fear-based campaign advocacy
4. Consider the role of motivation in the adoption of safer sex behaviours



# Effectiveness of fear-based campaigns

- Fear images attract attention and raise awareness
- Directive and easily remembered
- Change attitudes, but can they change behaviour?

# Can fear change behaviour?

- Little evidence of sustained behaviour change
- Did previous campaigns frighten or educate?
- Might increase uptake of HIV testing
- Might help to maintain existing behaviour



# Unintended Consequences

- Responses to fear arousing stimuli
  1. Avoidance
  2. Denial
  3. Counter-arguing
  4. Othering



# Unintended Consequences

- Can further exacerbate HIV stigma
- Stigma facilitates HIV transmission
- Prevention is a process, not an event

# Is fear the future?

- Many advocates for fear-based campaigns
  - Media
  - Politicians
  - Funders
  - Gay men

## Why?



*“Millions of people watched the tombstone adverts and read the leaflets warning them not to ‘die of ignorance’. Some people said the adverts were scary – but they helped us to stop the spread of HIV.”*

David Cameron

World AIDS Day 2010.





*“If I could dig up the rotting corpse of my dear departed partner, who died 11 years ago as a result of AIDS, and photograph a corrupted body and stick a photo in every cottage, nightclub bog and bar, I would, with the message ‘AIDS destroys lives and kills’.”*

*- Pink News Message board (2008)*



*“Thirty years have passed since the first cases of HIV were discovered among young homosexual men in the USA [...] Since then a new generation of men having sex with men (MSM) has entered the scene, a generation that has not experienced the horrors of the epidemic of the 1980s and early 1990s. They are not as scared of HIV and they are taking bigger risks.”*

Johan Carlson (2011) FEMP Newsletter



# Motivation

- Are men less motivated to avoid HIV?
- Is HIV less scary?
- If we needed to, how might we motivate men?  
(i.e. What are the alternatives to fear based campaigns?)



# Summary

- Not effective in terms of behaviour change
- Least effective for men with greatest need
- Many unintended consequences
- Still advocates who need convincing
- If motivation is lacking, how might we motivate men?



# [www.sigmaresearch.org.uk/files/MiC-briefing-1-Fear.pdf](http://www.sigmaresearch.org.uk/files/MiC-briefing-1-Fear.pdf)



This *Making it Count* briefing sheet examines the research on sexual health promotion interventions that aim to elicit fear. It explores if, when and where such interventions could successfully meet the sexual health needs of gay and other homosexually active men.

## HOW MIGHT FEAR WORK?

When we are faced with a threatening message or image our emotions may become aroused and we may become fearful. For several decades health promotion interventions have sought to arouse a fear of potentially harmful consequences as a means of dissuading us from engaging in particular behaviours. Images of car crashes and injured children have been used to encourage us not to drink alcohol and drive; messages about the risk of coronary heart disease on cigarette packets are used to encourage us not to smoke; and the potential for being hit by a car is shown visually to young people to dissuade them from playing near busy roads.

In the past, fear has also been used as part of HIV prevention activity in the UK as a means of encouraging

potentially fatal threat it posed. The metaphor of the iceberg commonly used on the television and in printed media inferred that far more people may be infected, or become infected, with HIV than was already the case.

*"A large number of health promotion campaigns are based on a simple strategy: get behind people with a big stick (lots of threat and fear) in the hope this will drive them in the desired direction."*  
(Soames-Job 1988, page 163)<sup>1</sup>

It was assumed that if people were made fearful of the consequences of HIV infection then they would be

