Book reviews

HIV Health and Your Community: A guide for action

By Reuben Granich and Jonathan Mermin (The Hesperian Foundation: Berkley, CA, 2001), 246 pp., (pbk) $15.95, ISBN 0-8047-3350-3.

This book provides a comprehensive and exhaustive guide to managing issues that arise in relation to HIV infection at a community level. The book evolved out of the experience of the authors in caring for people with HIV in Rwanda and their awareness that experience was the only teacher of people working in this area. The book attempts to provide a substitute for, and an enhancement to, this practice wisdom, which can be hard to pass on rapidly and systematically at the most critical times. The early chapters cover the nature of HIV, current, epidemiology, symptoms and testing. It has chapters on various aspects of prevention and covers both counselling and education for prevention. It also includes basic information on treatment, home nursing and support. Finally, it concludes with guidelines for designing a community HIV prevention project, complete with detailed information on how to think about applying for funding, how to write a good funding proposal and where to think about sending it.

The book has a readable and straightforward style that is very much enhanced by the personal stories of characters from a wide range of communities introducing each chapter. For example, José, a truck driver from Mexico, worries about whether or not he should take the HIV test, how much blood he will have to have taken and what he will tell his family if the result is positive. The chapter on testing then works through issues of assessing personal risk, taking a test, pre- and post-test counselling (including counselling after a positive result), what the results mean, privacy and telling others. At the end of the chapter, all the questions that José posed at the beginning are revisited as though he is a client of the reader. The reader learns how to manage a counselling session with José to answer his questions and how to predict and possibly avert some of the ongoing problems he may face after a test. This practical and personalised framework both makes the book readable and provides a ‘session’ of hands-on experience or professional supervision for readers wishing to use the book to develop their skills. This framework also means it could be used as a basic and reasonably comprehensive text for adult learners in a classroom situation.

The book does require a medium level of literacy even though its language is uncomplicated and easy to understand. It has an appendix on complications of, and treatments for, advanced HIV disease in language that clearly targets a reader with medical knowledge. Nevertheless, it is extensively illustrated to break up the larger blocks of text with many comic book-style stories and a good gender and ethnic balance in the characters depicted in the line drawings. The text is also broken up with sections in boxes pulling out key points or highlighting stories. Many of the illustrations, such as the ones relating to needle cleaning or the
equipment needed for home nursing, provide stand-alone visual instructions, which a reader could use to work with people with lower literacy levels. This is a real value-added aspect of this book.

The chapter entitled ‘How can I be a better teacher?’ is a well-grounded, step-by-step guide to adopting an educationally sound approach to training community-based health care workers. It is targeted at a would-be trainer who has gained some content knowledge in the area but has perhaps no training in education. It manages to pull out and explain the key elements of adult education as well as how to plan a session effectively, ice-breakers for getting started, experiential teaching methods such as role plays, modelling good practice and follow-up after the session. In addition, it covers the often-overlooked areas of valuing and learning from the experiences students bring to the group and incorporating their feelings and fears in the educational process. It concludes with a practical and detailed sample programme of how to run a one-day session to teach people to be HIV prevention educators. In fact, it is as good a crash course on adult education as I have ever seen.

The chapter on applying for funding is equally practical, taking the reader through a process of needs analysis and detailed project planning before the funding proposal is contemplated. Unlike other material I have read about this area, it assumes no previous knowledge of the funding process. It offers a list of the parts of a proposal right through from the cover letter and the title page to the bibliography and the attached CVs. Each of these components is explained in detail and illustrated with examples or ideas. It would certainly be possible to pick up this chapter and step-by-step use it to produce a very presentable funding submission.

However, the most unusual aspect of this particular chapter lies in the personal story of Maria from Peru who runs a boarding house for sex workers (many of whom are HIV positive) and who wants funding for outreach education and support of infected residents. At the end of the chapter, there is a ‘good news’ story about Maria getting funding from various sources and using it well. The thing that impresses me about the telling of this story is the extent to which the complexity of this process is acknowledged. Maria found that, as a result of getting funded, the workload for her and her volunteers increased, people’s expectations of what they should achieve grew, and Maria showed some signs of burn out.

This is not to say that the funding and success of the organization is not presented as the most positive thing, but it is certainly not romanticized. The capacity to capture complexity of this kind is an unusual attribute of a ‘how to’ book and one of the means by which the voice in this text is made so credible.

One could level a criticism at this book that it fails to be clear about who its audience will be, but that would be churlish under the circumstances. This is indeed a book that, in many ways, tries to be all things to all people and pretty much succeeds. It is not a book that one person would read from cover to cover because, by its very nature in addressing wide-ranging needs, it is designed for many different readers. It is essentially a resource which, were it available in a community, would fulfil the role of a library of other books and could potentially get action happening at a number of levels. I know of no other book as comprehensive in content and as practical in its approach and I would strongly recommend it.

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