

New National HIV/AIDS Campaign to Launch Next Week

by: Deandra Hamilton

In less than a week a vital campaign will be launched in the Turks and Caicos Islands and media professionals were the first to be appraised of the effort.

The National Aids Programme on Tuesday unveiled the "Ouch Campaign" aimed at reducing the stigma and discrimination directed at people living with HIV/AIDS. It will also work to improve perceptions and protections of health care workers.

Ms. Keziah Nash, Assistant Co-ordinator Programme Officer for the National Aids Programme talked about the initiative, "The Caribbean Epidemiology Centre, having recognized the problem that stigma and discrimination are causing among people living with AIDS and health care workers, created the campaign. We realize that fear is fuelling the wrong things because people are afraid to be tested, and to find out that they are HIV infected and so people are not aware of their status."

During a boardroom presentation, Co-ordinator of the National Aids Programme, Cheryl Ann Strachan cited the effects of stigmatising people living with HIV/AIDS. "It demoralises and dehumanises. It causes isolation and it robs people of their rights. Fear develops and prevents people from using condoms."

She stressed the dire need for community involvement, and urged the media to assist in ensuring "the message reaches

even beyond the target groups, all facets of the community. We have to continue targeting all areas because this is much, much more than a health care issue."

The official launch date is set for Tuesday January 16th and there is a mixture of promotional and marketing tools which are going to be used to flood Turks and Caicos with the positive point that stigma does not prevent the disease, it hurts the individuals.

There are posters, flyers, booklets, broadcast commercials, print ads, comics and a variety of message toting "Ouch" pouches for wide dissemination.

Ms. Nash explained, "The Turks and Caicos Islands, though we have not done a full scale survey to determine the problem here, we know that stigma discrimination exists from various anecdotal stories that we get from people are infected."

Media executives discussed a number of ingenious ways to get the public in the know. Ms. Nash agreed that the session was good and very necessary. "Before we go into the launch, we recognize the role of the media. The role of the media is critical in getting the campaign going, the implementation process of the campaign, the monitoring and evaluation process of the campaign. So we invited the media to see how they can assist us in implementing this campaign." She added, "I think the meeting went excellent. People are on board, people are ready to work and one of the things raised



is that the print and electronic media should all join together so that they all go forth in one voice and so that everybody will be echoing the same sentiments."

Bold red, sobering black and giant letters are signature to the style of the campaign. There are stories on 'Fear and Denial' like the one about Leroy who lived promiscuously, but because of the fear of finding out, he never got tested. Or the breakdown of types of stigmas in a booklet which cites, "rumours and gossip, avoiding the company of persons believed to be HIV positive and disregarding the feelings of others by abusing them verbally..."

"I think the campaign is striking, the whole impact, the whole message that is to be portrayed is that stigma and discrimination hurts; hence the word 'Ouch'. It is as if you get pinched, and you say, 'Ouch, it hurts! And I think once persons are informed because and people know how to deal with various aspects of HIV, I think people will come around and the whole thing about stigma will be erased."