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Media Coverage Concerning Sexually Transmitted Infections in Japan

Yasue Fukuda, Graduate School of Medicine, Osaka University, Japan

Abstract

News reports on the subject of infectious diseases play an important role in preventing behavior that increases the risk of public infection while also galvanizing public opinion and stimulating administrative organs to establish public health policies and allocate budgets accordingly. This paper discusses how news about sexually transmitted infections (STIs: HIV/AIDS and hepatitis B) has been reported in newspapers, by analyzing two major newspaper articles; the Asahi Shimbun and Yomiuri Shimbun's databases, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and examining their impact on patients as well as their families and the changes they have brought to public scientific awareness of infection risks. It also attempts to identify the stakeholders in Japan's reporting system and assess the impact of those news reports and to explore the proper ethical considerations, reporting systems, and press standards that may be desirable for the control and prevention of infectious diseases while respecting the human rights of patients and the people around them. The conclusion is that by establishing common standards in advance, news reports can be expected to focus more on controlling the spread of STIs.

Introduction

The great majority of people rely on media reports for healthcare information,^{1,2,3} and the mass media plays an essential role in health communication. The mass media is also known as the "Fourth Estate"⁴ because its power to influence public opinion rivals that of governments, bureaucracies, and judicial systems. However, journalists who cover medical care issues do not necessarily have adequate knowledge of medical science. Accordingly, their reports may at times contain inaccurate and misleading information or present extremely biased views.^{5,6,7}

The Legal Status and Ethical Standards of the Mass Media in Japan are based on the following, Article 21.1 of the Japanese Constitution which guarantees freedom of expression. The public, as the receiver of information from the media, is thus guaranteed its right to knowledge through the mass media. Recognizing their specific roles, the Japanese newspaper media and broadcasting media have voluntarily laid down regulations concerning news reporting standards. They include the Canon of Journalism (established 2000) of the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association (NSK). The NSK Canon of Journalism, however, makes no

specific mention of STIs. The effectiveness of such ethical codes and standards for media reports has thus been called into question.

Some research into media coverage of STI's already exists including comparative studies of news reports from countries with different political systems.^{8,9} Since measures against HIV/AIDS were demanded as a Millennium Development Goal, media research was conducted on the spread of knowledge of STIs to people in African countries.^{10,11} A Canadian study concerned itself with the risk factors of HIV/AIDS for native Canadians.¹² The Australian research pointed out the media fails to engage the mainstream of public opinion or change people's perceptions¹³. Several studies on HIV/AIDS coverage have been conducted in Japan, but they have simply examined the quantitative trends of newspaper articles on the disease.¹⁴

First, this paper will examine the characteristics of how STIs are reported in Japan. Secondly, we will identify the actors (stakeholders), analyze the content of media coverage of infectious diseases, and examine the impact news reports have had on the perceptions of each actor. Lastly, we will consider the type of reporting system and standards that may be desirable for protecting public interests, i.e., patients' human rights, privacy, and prevention of the spread of STIs.

1. Status and Causes of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B Infections in Japan

Sexually transmitted infections require effective policies that respect the human rights of patients and their families and give proper consideration to social background. Among high-risk groups are young people, foreign residents with language or cultural barriers, and homosexuals.

In Japan, there were reported to be 1,126 HIV carriers and 421 AIDS patients in 2008.¹⁵ The reported number of HIV carriers decreased after peaking in 1992, but has increased again since 1995. In terms of transmission mode, heterosexual contact accounts for 34.1% of all infections, homosexual contact, 43.9%, and intravenous drug use, 1.2%. The fact that the spread of the HIV through male homosexual contact is increasing while cases of transmission via blood products and mother-to-child transmission are decreasing indicates that HIV/AIDS can now be primarily regarded as STIs.

An estimated 0.97 million people aged 15-65 in Japan are carriers of the hepatitis B virus (HBV).¹⁶ Cases of HBV infection through blood transfusion decreased with the commencement of HBs antigen testing in 1972. The majority of these people contracted the virus through mother-to-child transmission before the HBV Parental Transmission Prevention Program was implemented in 1986.¹⁷

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Improper medical practice is said to be the cause of infection in half of all HBV carriers, but after the reuse of needles in mass vaccination programs was prohibited in 1989, the HBV virus spread mainly as an STI.¹⁸ As HIV/AIDS and hepatitis B viruses are sexually transmitted, they need to be treated in the same manner as STIs.

2 . Analysis of Newspaper Articles on HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B

2.1 Methods

In this study, we used the Asahi Shimbun and Yomiuri Shimbun's databases. These two newspapers were selected for analysis because they boast the largest and second-largest circulations in the world (Asahi Shimbun: 8.03 million, Yomiuri Shimbun: 10.01 million), and also because they have accessible databases.

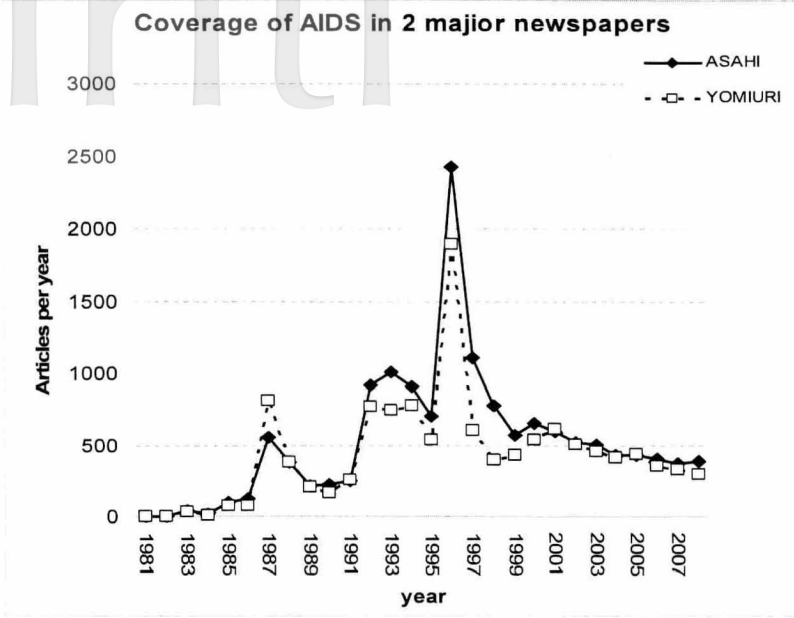
With the Asahi Shimbun, we searched for articles related to infectious diseases in compressed editions for 1981 to 1984, and in the database for years after 1985, using keyword and heading search functions. With the Yomiuri Shimbun, we conducted the same search of keywords and headings using "Yomidas Rekishikan (History Pavilion)," an online database of articles carried by the newspaper.

The keywords we used to search for articles related to infectious diseases were: "AIDS" (in Japanese and English), "HIV," "hepatitis B," "hepatitis," and "blood products." Additionally, "strange disease," "gay," and "homosexual" were also used to retrieve articles on AIDS. The articles obtained were organized in chronological order and analyzed. Each AIDS-related article was analyzed in terms of whether it treats AIDS as a foreign or domestic issue, whether it refers to high-risk groups, and what its main focus is, e.g., whether it mentions AIDS patients in Japan. The information sources of the articles were also analyzed.

2.2 Results—Quantitative Analysis of Articles

Until the disease was officially named "AIDS" in 1982, it was regarded as an unidentified disease peculiar to homosexual men. Based on this understanding, we searched for articles written after 1981 on diseases related to homosexuals, examined their content, and treated them as AIDS-related articles. Articles run on the same day but with different titles were counted as separate articles. Figure 1 shows the trends in the number of news articles on HIV/AIDS.

There have been conspicuous fluctuations over the years, with the first drastic increase occurring in 1987. The number of HIV/AIDS articles decreased for several years thereafter, but surged again in 1992 and peaked in 1996. Since then, the trend has gradually decreased again.



g. 1 Trends in the number of news articles on HIV/AIDS, Asahi Shimbun, and the Yomiuri Shimbun. (1981-2008)

Compared to HIV/AIDS, there are very few articles on hepatitis B, reflecting the public's low level of awareness concerning the disease (Fig. 2). The increase seen in 2008 is the result of a number of articles on a hepatitis B lawsuit that garnered much attention around that time.

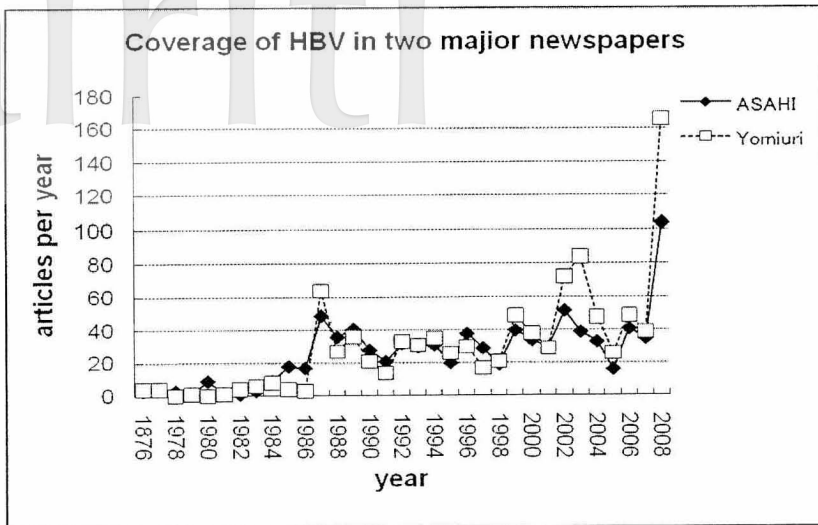


Fig. 2 Transition (1976-2008) of amount of coverage of the Asahi Shimbun of hepatitis B, and the Yomiuri Shimbun

3. Results—Qualitative Analysis of Newspaper Articles on HIV/AIDS

3.1 Unidentified "Strange" Disease as a Foreign Issue (1981 - 1983)

The July 5, 1981 edition of the Asahi Shimbun carried the first news report on AIDS in Japan. The article, entitled "Bad News for Homophiles" introduced AIDS as a foreign topic based on data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States. The Yomiuri Shimbun ran an article entitled "Rapid Increase in Special Cancer among Homosexuals" on December 22, 1981, and reported that Kaposi's sarcoma was spreading among groups of homosexuals in the United States.

Furthermore, an article dated May 1, 1983 introduced AIDS as a deadly "strange disease" that is spreading among homosexuals and drug addicts in the United States. Even after the "unidentified disease" was identified as AIDS, many articles continued to refer to AIDS as a "strange disease."

However, finally, on May 25, 1983, the Asahi Shimbun reported that AIDS might be a viral infectious disease, that it is sexually transmitted, and that it might be transmitted by blood transfusion and blood products. Also in 1983, the CDC reported that tainted blood products are the cause of AIDS in patients with hemophilia.¹⁹

The Yomiuri Shimbun ran a story on April 13, 1984 about a patient in the United States

who developed a hematological disorder from a blood transfusion from an AIDS patient. Compared to the Asahi Shimbun, the Yomiuri Shimbun ran far fewer articles on AIDS, implying that it had less interest in AIDS than the Asahi Shimbun. Therefore, the analyses presented below are based mainly on articles from the Asahi Shimbun.

3.2 Emergence of HIV Carriers in Japan (1983 - 1985)

The first article on the outbreak of AIDS in Japan appeared in the March 21, 1985 edition of the Asahi Shimbun. It mentioned that Dr. Takeshi Abe, who headed the Ministry of Welfare's first AIDS research team, would present the cases of two hemophiliac patients he had diagnosed.

However, on March 23, a follow-up article stated that a Japanese male who was residing in the United States and received an HIV/AIDS test in Japan was registered as Japan's first AIDS patient by the Ministry's AIDS Study Committee. The above articles revealed the patients' ages, symptoms, and their general place of residence.

Another five AIDS cases were reported on May 31, 1985, based on information provided by the Ministry of Welfare; three of the five patients were hemophiliacs and two were homosexuals. No other attributes were provided.

3.3 AIDS panic, Breach of Privacy or Public Benefit? (1986 - 1987)

There were three controversial cases inducing AIDS panic in Japan. Firstly, the November 7, 1986 edition of the Asahi Shimbun carried an article about a Filipino woman with AIDS in Nagano. The article disclosed her name and previous background as a sex worker in Nagano Prefecture.

The basis of the article was a news story issued by the Kyodo News Service, Manila Bureau, on November 3.²⁰ Japan's excessive mass media reports caused an "AIDS panic" near Matsumoto where she lived.

Secondly, on January 18, 1987 newspapers reported the death from AIDS of a woman in Kobe. The articles gave the woman's age and symptoms, and reported that she had been living with a foreign sailor suspected of being a homosexual and that she had had sex with over a hundred men. News of the female AIDS patient in Kobe spread far and wide, and had 3,195 people rushing to receive consultation at local health centers and 1,092 people lining up for blood tests.²¹

Thirdly, a case reported on February 19, 1987 concerned a pregnant woman in Kochi Prefecture who had contracted AIDS from hemophiliacs infected with HIV by contaminated blood

products.

In this case, the circumstances surrounding the ethics of respecting personal privacy and reporting information of public interest such as infection control were extremely complicated.

According to the principles of the Kyodo News Agency Science Department, articles are not to be written about hemophiliacs or their relatives, because they are victims of poor drug administration and deserve to have their personal privacy protected, or about uninfected spouses or unborn children prior to confirming mother-to-child transmission, also for reasons of privacy. However, the Kyodo News Agency decided to run the story after considering the coverage in weekly magazines and learning that major newspapers would carry the story.²²

The above articles show that when news about AIDS in Japan was reported for the first time, it was common practice to provide details of the patient's age, place of residence, lifestyle habits, and other personal information.

3.4 Reports concerning Human Rights and Prejudice

Around 1985, some articles about discrimination and prejudice against AIDS patients were written by Dr. Takeshi Abe. From 1989, the number of articles on this subject increased, along with discussions concerning the enactment of the AIDS prevention law. The issue of employment discrimination against HIV patients surfaced when a corporate employee sued his company on December 22, 1992 for firing him due to HIV infection.

In 1993, an AIDS patient who was denied medical treatment at Kansai Medical University filed a human rights violation suit with the Japan Federation of Bar Associations. Issues related to the human rights of AIDS patients and discrimination received wide coverage when a foreigner visiting Japan was refused a hotel room. Similar cases of HIV patients being refused medical care or employment and other related news concerning AIDS and human rights were prevalent in the media.²³

3.5 News related to an HIV-tainted Blood Product Lawsuit

In 1986, a patient who contracted HIV through a tainted blood product sued the government and pharmaceutical companies. In 1996, there was a sharp increase in news reports on AIDS, primarily due to an increase in articles concerning the tainted-blood product scandal (Asahi Shimbun: 1,541 articles; Yomiuri Shimbun: 582 articles) and accompanying interest in the AIDS issue. Around this time, there was a general air of criticism regarding Japan's drug administration. The tainted-blood product scandal gathered momentum in 1995, and a settlement was reached in 1996.

In 1998, the AIDS prevention law was abolished after being criticized as cultivating a

sense of prejudice and discrimination against AIDS patients. The number of articles on AIDS prejudice increased around the time the law was abolished, partly because the defense group in the tainted-blood product scandal actively encouraged journalists and the news media to cover the issue. As the defense group conceded, it tried to attract attention to the issue because it was concerned that the Ministry of Welfare was focusing heavily on HIV prevention and not the scandal itself.

4. Qualitative Analysis of Newspaper Articles: Reports on Hepatitis B

Now let us take a look at hepatitis B. Given the prohibition of repeated needle use in mass vaccination programs and the gradual decline in the number of cases of hepatitis B infection through blood products and mother-to-child transmission, sexual contact is becoming the major route of transmission. Among the different types of hepatitis B virus, carriers of genotype A are gradually increasing. This type is transmitted among adults through sexual contact, and readily establishes a carrier state in those who are infected. It can develop into chronic hepatitis B, cause cirrhosis, or result in liver cancer in about 10% of all carriers.

It is therefore becoming increasingly important to improve the rate of HBV antigen testing and to implement preventive education and other measures against sexually transmitted diseases.

The mass media, for its part, is expected to contribute by reporting on the importance of the test and of practicing preventive behavior to the general public. However, Japan's media remains focused on the hepatitis B lawsuit against infection caused by repeated needle use in mass vaccination programs for schoolchildren, and there is increasing concern that only this transmission route is receiving public attention. With so few articles intended to prevent the spread of hepatitis B as a sexually transmitted disease, many people remain unaware of this transmission route of the virus and continue uninformed about preventive behavior.

The view that infection caused by the mass vaccination program is an "acceptable infection" and that infection by sexual contact is a "contemptible infection" might even cause those people who have contracted hepatitis B through sexual contract to be ostracized from society. This is precisely why the mass media must play a part in disseminating a comprehensive understanding of how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

5. Discussion

As HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B, and other STIs continue to spread in Japan, the media is expected to contribute to educational activities for STI prevention. Even in cases where a newspaper company has internal regulations based on an in-house code of ethics, the company

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may decide to run a story that provides personal information about a patient with a sexually transmitted disease, in order to maintain its competitive position against other newspapers. To ensure proper coverage of STIs, the preliminary evaluation items below need to be shared by all media.

First of all, accuracy of information concerning transmission routes, methods of prevention, and risks of infectious disease is paramount. Additionally, the mass media must assess, what information the public needs to know to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

Secondly, prior consideration must be given to high-risk groups such as homosexuals, bisexuals, immigrants, sex workers, and hemophilia patients who might suffer by such coverage. Thirdly, in relation to the above, the mass media must consider whether the information it plans to disclose should be communicated to the general public, or whether it is more effective to communicate with specific groups only. In the case of the latter, it should be noted that the information could contribute to effective prevention if it is provided to specific target groups via such media as community magazines and the Internet.

Fourthly, the coverage of infectious diseases as an ethical issue frequently results in the infected and their families being denied treatment at medical institutions. Medical institutions, on their part, justify their rejection of these people by claiming that they do not have proper infection prevention and control facilities. This is a policy issue that demands the establishment of a dedicated medical system for the treatment of infectious diseases.

Fifthly, the media must assess what type of scientific information would satisfy social needs and judge whether the information is useful for the prevention and control of infectious diseases. It needs to subjectively assess the true substance of a technology and its risks and aim to promote its utilization while establishing appropriate relationships from all stakeholders who advocate vaccines for infectious diseases, including pharmaceutical companies, importers, government offices, academia, victims' and patients' groups.

Finally, the issue of continuity of coverage. News reports are expected to provide topics of current interest, but in the case where an infectious disease is spreading continuously or in an unseen manner, it is vital that they convey the risks of the disease on an ongoing basis and increase public awareness of prevention.

6. Conclusion

Infectious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis B are still continuing to spread in Japan. This study showed that failure to provide appropriate coverage could delay or prevent policy

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responses, or lower public interest and deter preventive behavior. One characteristic of Japan's mass media has become clear from the analysis of media reports. That is, (1) the mass media tends to pursue "first-time incidents."²⁴ However, (2) news coverage does not necessarily correspond to what is socially important.²⁵ Moreover, (3) news coverage is influenced by stakeholders such as the government and legal defense teams, and (4) it is sometimes difficult to accurately communicate important information, because information is boiled down to "black-or-white" to facilitate public understanding. Finally, (5) a large concern is the lack of understanding that the receivers of information are composed of a variety of stakeholders including infected individuals and their families, policymakers, medical workers, and patient advocacy groups.

By establishing common standards in advance, news reports can be expected to focus more on controlling the spread of sexually transmitted infections. However, to ensure the effectiveness of these standards, it is necessary to create a relationship where linguists, ethicists, and sociologists who can assess the social impact of information, which is communicated by the mass media, government, patients and their families, supporting organizations, and medical specialists, mutually regulate, govern, and share information.

The scope of this study was limited to the two major newspapers in Japan for reasons of copyright and verifiability, and television media was excluded. However, since many people now rely on television and the Internet to acquire information, it may also be necessary to conduct a study in these fields.

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Correspondence

Yasue Fukuda

Graduate School of Medicine, Osaka University

Address : 1-1 Yamadaoka, Suita, Osaka 565-0871 Japan

Website : <http://www.med.osaka-u.ac.jp/>