

Sean Brennan - Zambia

Internship Final Report

June 2 nd – August 15 th , 2003

Background

The Zambia Integrated Health Programme is a collaboration between the Zambian Ministry of Health, USAID, the Swedish development agency, Johns Hopkins University and a number of other players. The head office where I worked is in Lusaka , the capital. However, none of our projects are here. They are all deliberately located away from the capital where more authentic community-based work can be conducted. I worked in the communications branch.

Specifically, I interned in the Media Office which produces a mass media health campaign called the “Better Health Campaign” on behalf of the Ministry of Health. The main activities are a weekly TV mini-documentary, a weekly radio program, a weekly TV talk show. These materials are published or broadcast, usually in multiple local languages, in the major media outlets of Zambia .

Activities

My internship experience with the ZIHPCOMM media office was both informative and enjoyable. The following describes my activities:

- Researching and preparing (or helping to prepare) message strategies on Rural Family Planning, Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission, Safe Motherhood, SARS and Distance Education Courses for health.
- Drafting and helping to edit a weekly newspaper column, titled *To Your Health* and based on the message strategies, published in the Times of Zambia.
- Going on location to help produce and review the mini-documentary program, *Your Health Matters* , prepared for TV and radio and based on the message strategies.
- Interviewing a reproductive health community service worker, Mr. Webista Chilombe, and taking pictures for a supplemental newspaper article on his work with community based distribution of family planning. Contributing other pieces to an ongoing series of health supplements in the newspapers.
- Drafting ideas for posters promoting rural family planning for the reproductive health communications coordinator at ZIHPCOMM.
- Integrating myself into the local public health network. Specifically, I attended a consultation at USAID on the health sector in Zambia and the process of ARV scale-up

in country. I attended staff meetings, followed literature on the topics being covered, attended public dissemination workshops on key Zambian Health issues, attended in-house capacity building workshops on monitoring and evaluation.

- Reviewing a critical mass of mass media work that was produced by the Media Office in the past two years and providing written comments and suggestions.
- Preparing a written documentation and dissemination plan in anticipation of the project's end and the need to pursue further funding and provide accountability to donors.

Experiences

My experience with ZIHP was heartening. After working for a stream of development related agencies and NGOs, I was delighted to find a dedicated, competent working environment which was both friendly and hard-working. It was a unique and wonderful experience working almost exclusively with Zambian colleagues who were willing to share their unique insights with their foreign colleague.

Writing the various newspaper columns that I was able to write was a special treat and the internship provided a truly exceptional opportunity to see the inner workings, both the power and the challenges, of a large-scale mass-media campaign for health.

My only regret is that my health was so poor during the limited time that I had with ZIHP. Having fallen quite sick five times (six if one counts my sprained ankle) in only twelve weeks was a bit of a shock. It made it hard to adhere to the standards of professionalism that I would have preferred. In particular I wish I had been able to more fully seize the bounty of opportunity that was available to me.

Learning

This internship was remarkable in that it meshed closely with my own academic and career interests. The opportunity to travel and meet with persons intimately involved in reproductive health at the local level was exceptional.

In particular, my 2 ½ months here allowed me to follow the experiences of Webista Chilombe in Kapiri Mposhi District and his travails in providing access to contraception to the people. The extent to which his experience mirrored some of the predictions of my professors regarding the provision of contraception in a developing country context was shocking. It was shocking because it highlighted the sorry reality of providing basic, necessary items that should be widely available for health.

I was also able to conduct some investigations into another key reproductive health issue in Zambia : abortion. The results of conversations with women in the office and interviews around town were astounding. Foreign health experts are more likely to know that abortion is in fact legal in Zambia while conventional wisdom locally says that it is not. My colleagues highlighted the impact that this has on access to safe abortion and

challenged me with the idea that the major barrier for most women is ignorance: no one knows that abortion is not illegal!

My views on these issues have been profoundly impacted by the opportunity to see them first hand and my commitment to reproductive health has been redoubled.