

## Public perceptions of the role of television in raising Aids awareness

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**TELEVISION has played, and will continue to play, a prominent role in many Aids awareness campaigns. What is not so certain is how the viewing public regards programmes with an Aids content, what proportion actually watch such programmes and whether these programmes are of any educational value. This study sought to address some of these issues by surveying public interest in television coverage of Aids and its relevant issues, using a nationally representative panel of viewers. The study asked respondents how much they personally felt they knew about Aids and measured these subjective assessments against scores obtained from responses to a knowledge test. Perceptions of the impact different televised events might have on the public's awareness of Aids were also investigated, together with respondents' views on the suitability of including Aids material in various programmes.**

THE HIV and Aids pandemic is the first worldwide epidemic to have emerged for many years; its latency and deadliness are unique among sexually transmitted diseases. The magnitude of this pandemic has increased over 100-fold since the first Aids cases were diagnosed in the United States just over a decade ago. At that time they caused worldwide alarm and the World Health Organisation soon began to warn that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was well established in many countries, that it was sexually transmitted and that public education about safer sex offered the only method of stemming its spread. Public health campaigners are faced with enormous difficulties in combating the spread of Aids; likewise governments, who are concerned to be seen to be 'doing something' to oppose what they are convinced is a major health threat, but which is not perceived as a personal threat by many citizens. Thus, the media, and in particular television, were perceived as having a major role to play, at least in the developed world, in educating the masses about the disease and so hopefully preventing its progress.

Initially, media coverage of the subject was not heavy, even in the USA. After 1983 there were concentrated bursts of increased coverage, but until the death of Rock Hudson in 1985 "US policy-makers and the public could have concluded from mass media coverage that Aids was perversely fascinating, but, overall, not very important as a national issue"<sup>1</sup>. In Britain, this remained the case until 1986, the year the Government formally recognised the public health threat, and orchestrated a major television-centred

campaign. The full-scale public education campaign in Britain was, therefore, only six years old at the time this paper was researched. It is made more difficult by the relative invisibility of the threat to the general public. In Western countries, the majority of adult Aids cases have so far been among homosexuals and intravenous drug abusers. In Africa, where the disease has made far more serious inroads, the virus is almost exclusively transmitted through heterosexual contact. Worldwide, some twelve million people have now been infected by the disease.

Health agencies in many countries have established programmes to educate the general population, as well as the known high-risk groups, about the factors which may increase the risk of exposure to HIV, and to encourage individuals to take steps to reduce their personal risk of infection<sup>2</sup>. While these programmes have enjoyed some success in increasing public awareness of Aids, they have tended to be less effective in achieving behaviour modification<sup>3,4</sup>. This is especially true among the young, who have a strong sense of their own invincibility<sup>5</sup>. In 1990, for example, 65 per cent of British 16-19-year-olds were sexually active and 52 per cent had had full sexual intercourse<sup>6</sup>. The majority of British 16-24-year-olds in 1990 believed that they were at no risk of HIV or Aids<sup>7</sup>, while by the same date the proportion of reports of HIV infection in that group had risen to 25 per cent of the total<sup>8</sup> number of HIV cases.

Television has played a prominent role in many Aids campaigns. Its impact on the public in Britain, however, has been mixed. It has been shown that knowledge levels about what Aids is and how it can be transmitted have been improved by television campaigns<sup>4</sup>. However, the same study revealed that attitudes towards the disease, or those groups identified as being at high risk of contracting HIV, exhibited only modest shifts contingent upon exposure to television campaign messages. Additionally, reported sexual behaviour patterns among the heterosexual population seemed hardly to have changed at all<sup>4</sup>. This finding is in line with previous public health campaign experience. For example, a recent Norwegian media Aids awareness campaign found that whilst one quarter of the target population of adolescents reported a general awareness of the campaign, use of condoms was no higher among these adolescents, than among those with no knowledge of the campaign<sup>9</sup>.

However, there are a number of important key areas which are often neglected when the media's influence

on public opinion about Aids is considered<sup>10</sup>: first, the history of public reaction to disease and infection; secondly, neglect of the processes of message construction; thirdly, a tendency to assume a homogeneity in Aids coverage across all media; fourthly, failure to place Aids coverage within a wider context of the media's portrayal of health and illness; and fifthly, reluctance to examine, at a deeper level, the relationships between the context of Aids-related media messages and audience decodings of them<sup>10</sup>.

There is ample evidence that television transmits many indirect messages about health<sup>11-13</sup>. Gerbner and colleagues<sup>14</sup> drew attention to health-related messages contained in television's drama and entertainment programming in order to understand the potential role of television in cultivating health-related beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. These 'embedded' health messages are likely to have an indirect but pervasive influence on the public's views about health. They have certainly played a major role in the formation of popular images and understandings of the disease. One criticism levelled at the mass media's coverage of Aids during the 1980s focused on the degree of stereotyping and oversimplification of what is a complex subject. According to some writers, this style of treatment led the public to perceive Aids as a disease which was identified only with particular groups such as homosexuals and intravenous drug users. This led to a diminution in perceptions of personal risk for those not within these groups.<sup>15-18</sup>

Some have argued that if media approaches did not continually contradict and conflict with one another there would be every likelihood that their effects would be more substantial. However, it is the nature of television that issues such as Aids are addressed in a variety of different ways, through drama and fictitious portrayals, for example, as well as in documentary-type programming. This may well be positive rather than negative. It is possible that television coverage featuring dramatic as well as factual depictions of Aids, and discussions of the subject involving different groups and perspectives, is serving to redress the balance, rather than reinforce initial associations of Aids with particular minority groups. While the public is known to draw extensively on the mass media for information, it should also be credited with the ability to interpret media and health education accounts. Miller and colleagues<sup>19</sup> found that those who knew someone who was openly a prostitute, an intravenous drug user, a gay man, or someone who was HIV positive, were liable to reject stigmatising media portrayals. Positive and personalised coverage of people with HIV, such as that of Mark Fowler in the soap opera *EastEnders*, was shown to be important in allowing viewers to identify with people living with the virus and to enable them to develop a more complex picture of their own risk status<sup>19</sup>.

Too little is known about the health promotion strategies that will prove most effective in particular contexts and for particular audiences. For example, how explicit should the information be? Television broadcasters have been criticised for corrupting the young by drawing attention to sexuality and sexual relations through the promotion of condoms and for publicising

and conferring legitimacy on homosexuality and homosexual behaviour<sup>20</sup>. In contrast, there are those who are concerned that educational messages aimed at groups thought to be at high risk may not be explicit enough to communicate effectively<sup>3</sup>. A cross-cultural study which assessed people's reactions to a set of television representations of Aids found that those perceived to be most successful, from an educational standpoint, were the ones which presented hard facts in a simple and straightforward manner<sup>21</sup>. Unfortunately, some of these campaign materials had never been sanctioned for general broadcast use in their countries, because of their relatively explicit nature<sup>21</sup>.

This paper reports on a study which explored public opinion about the ways in which television could more effectively cover the subject of Aids. A panel of television viewers was surveyed to examine the level of public interest in Aids coverage on television, and to probe public opinion about the expected impact of different media events on Aids awareness. Media reports of well-known celebrities dying of Aids are thought to have a lasting impact on setting agendas for discussion<sup>10</sup>. This paper examines public perceptions of the media events most likely to have the greatest influence, on Aids awareness in the general population and also looks at the types of programme which viewers consider to be good vehicles for Aids messages.

## Methods

A postal survey was conducted with a nationally representative television viewing panel, run by the Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB) to assess public opinion of television programming. The BARB television opinion panel is used regularly by the Independent Television Commission's (ITC) audience research department, as well as by Independent Television companies and the BBC, to monitor public opinion of television output. Individuals are recruited, throughout every region of the UK, via in-home interviews by trained market research interviewers, for a period of two years. The panel is continuously monitored to ensure that it remains demographically representative of the UK population as a whole and to weed out poor responders.

Every week over 4,000 panel members are sent a viewing diary to monitor which programmes they watched during the week, and an additional questionnaire booklet, which surveys their opinions on pertinent broadcasting issues. Panel members are not required to alter their normal pattern of television viewing in any respect, nor to pay more attention to programmes than is usual. While panel members obviously anticipate a weekly questionnaire in addition to the viewing diary, they are not primed as to the topic or nature of the questions, other than that they will have some relevance to broadcasting. It is typical that one in four panel members fails to return their completed questionnaire and viewing diary. This being the case, BARB aims to achieve a weekly response rate approaching 3,000 replies. The response rate ranges from between 74 per cent to 93 per cent.

During the week beginning December 16 1991, panellists were sent a questionnaire entitled 'Tele-

vision and Health'. The questionnaire sought to determine the public's interest in health type programmes, but more specifically its focus was on Aids as a health issue. Questions were asked to elicit viewers' opinions of the television coverage concerning Aids, their frequency of viewing programmes dealing with the subject and how much they *felt* they knew about Aids. Respondents' *actual* Aids knowledge was objectively tested using 11 true/false statements.

During this particular week, just under 3,000 (2,826) replies were received. This is not atypical of the usual weekly response rate from the BARB television viewing panel. Analysis revealed that the non-respondents did not differ significantly from the sample with respect to age, social class, sex or weight of television viewing (how many hours of television they watched per week). Forty-nine per cent of those who replied were male and 51 per cent female. The sample comprised the following age-bands: 12-15s (8 per cent), 16-24s (11 per cent), 25-34s (17 per cent), 35-44s (16 per cent), 45-54s, (13 per cent), and 55s and over (35 per cent). In terms of social class, respondents were grouped as ABs (15 per cent), C1s (21 per cent), C2s (33 per cent), and DEs (31 per cent).

## Results

### *Interest in health programmes*

When asked how interested they were in programmes about health, nearly two out of three respondents (65 per cent) said they were either 'very' (17 per cent) or 'quite' (49 per cent) interested in such programmes on television. A small proportion (five per cent) did not answer. Opinion varied according to the sex and age of respondents. Female respondents (74 per cent) were more likely than males (59 per cent) to express an interest in health programmes. This is in line with the actual split between the male and female audiences for *Aids Update '91*, shown nightly after *News at Ten* in December 1991. Respondents in the 16-44-year-old age range (71 per cent) were the most likely to express an interest in health-related programmes, ahead of respondents aged 45 and over (63 per cent) and 12-15-year-olds (57 per cent).

Affiliated to interest in programmes about health was the question of how frequently respondents watched these programmes when they were televised. One in five respondents (20 per cent) said that they 'always' (2 per cent) or 'usually' (18 per cent) tried to watch if a health programme was on. Just over half the sample (53 per cent) said they would occasionally watch if the topic was of particular interest, while 17 per cent and five per cent, respectively, said that they 'hardly ever' or 'never' watched these programmes. The remainder (five per cent) did not answer this question. Respondents aged 25 years and over were more likely (19 per cent), on average, than those aged under 25 (12 per cent), to say they usually tried to watch health programmes when they were on.

### *Programmes about Aids*

All respondents were asked if they had ever seen a programme about Aids. Over half (56 per cent) said that they had, while a substantial proportion, almost four in ten (38 per cent) said that they had never seen a

programme about Aids. Age was the most significant discriminator here, with respondents aged 16 to 44 (66 per cent) being most likely to report having seen a programme about Aids, ahead of 45-54-year-olds (56 per cent), those 65 and over (44 per cent) and 12-15-year-olds (44 per cent). Middle-class (ABC1) respondents (60 per cent) were more likely than working-class (C2DE) respondents (54 per cent) to report having seen such programmes.

Respondents who claimed to have seen programmes about Aids were asked how recently they had watched this type of programme. More than one in five respondents (23 per cent) said they had watched a programme dealing with Aids within the last two weeks (four per cent in the last week), while one third (33 per cent) had watched one during the last month, 26 per cent in the last six months, and fewer than one in five (17 per cent) in the last year.

### *Aids interest and knowledge*

Several questions addressed the issue of how interested and informed respondents were about Aids. All respondents were invited to answer these questions. Knowledge was measured by how much respondents felt they knew and by an objective knowledge test with right and wrong answers, which were scored.

Asked if their interest in Aids was at the same level now as it had been five years ago, more than four in ten (43 per cent) said their level of interest remained the same. Of those respondents who indicated that their interest had altered over the past five years, the greater proportion claimed that it had increased (32 per cent) rather than decreased (18 per cent). Female viewers (38 per cent) were more likely than male viewers (27 per cent) to say their interest in watching programmes about Aids had grown over the past five years. Growth in interest was also far more prevalent among younger respondents. Just over half the sample of 12-15-year-olds (52 per cent) and four in ten of the 16-24-year-olds (41 per cent) said their interest in Aids programmes had increased, compared with just over one third (35 per cent) of the 25-44-year-olds and one in four (25 per cent) of respondents aged 45 years or more.

On the question of how much respondents *felt* they knew about Aids, six out of ten (60 per cent) said they either knew quite a bit (53 per cent) or a great deal (seven per cent). Just over one in four, though, said they did not know much (24 per cent) or hardly anything (three per cent). Fourteen per cent did not answer. Subjective knowledge levels (claiming to know at least quite a bit) were greater among respondents aged 16 to 44 (71 per cent) than among 45-54s (59 per cent), those aged 55 and over (47 per cent) or 12-15-year-olds (53 per cent).

Did respondents feel that their knowledge had changed over the past five years? Nearly eight out of ten (79 per cent) believed their knowledge about Aids had changed: for most (76 per cent) it had improved, but for a tiny few (three per cent) it was felt to have become worse. One in five either did not know (seven per cent) or failed to answer (13 per cent). Claiming to know more about Aids now than five years ago was

markedly more widespread among 16-44-year-olds (84 per cent) than among 45-54s (78 per cent) and more especially than those aged 55 and over (65 per cent) and 12-15-year-olds (73 per cent).

*Claimed* knowledge is not, of course, the same as *actual* knowledge. Thus, respondents' knowledge about Aids and the ways the virus might be transmitted was tested using a list of eleven statements of 'fact', some of which were true and some of which were false. Respondents were asked to indicate which was which, or to say that they did not know. The results, summarised in **Table 1**, reveal reasonably respectable levels of knowledge, but with room for further improvement. The great majority gave correct responses to the following items: that a person can contract Aids via a needle which has been used by someone with HIV, that someone with HIV may appear healthy, whether a woman with HIV can pass it on to a man with whom she has sexual intercourse, and whether HIV can be contracted via a cut or graze.

A majority of respondents also replied correctly to a further four items, about contracting Aids from a pool in which people with HIV have been swimming, whether Aids inevitably leads to death, whether those with HIV will automatically develop Aids, and whether Aids can be contracted from the saliva of someone with HIV. In each of these cases, however, there were still substantial numbers who were either incorrect, or who admitted that they did not know the right answer. It was clear that a majority of respondents did not know the final three items, which included whether the symptoms of Aids are always the same, whether Aids can be contracted via insects, or whether there is a test which can definitely show that a person has *not* got the HIV virus.

#### **General views about television and Aids**

More than four in ten respondents believed that the amount of coverage given to Aids on television was about right (43 per cent). Respondents were more likely to say that there was too little coverage (21 per cent) than that there was too much (11 per cent). One in four respondents (25 per cent) either held no opinion on this matter (11 per cent) or failed to answer (14 per cent). The view that there was too little coverage was most widely held by the youngest respondents, aged 12 to 24 years (33 per cent), to a slightly lesser extent by those in the middle age ranges (25-34: 30 per cent; 35-44: 21 per cent), and least of all by the oldest respondents (45-54s: 26 per cent; 65 and over: eight per cent). As age increased, respondents became progressively more likely to say there was too much coverage of Aids on television. Gender ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ), age ( $r = -.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and objective knowledge ( $r = -.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were the significant correlates, indicating that females, younger respondents and those with greater knowledge about Aids were more likely to say that television gave too little rather than too much coverage to Aids. This opinion also exhibited a weak relationship, in the presence of controls for effects of gender, age, class and overall weight of television viewing, with interest in health programmes ( $r = -.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Respondents were next asked how likely they

**Table 1**  
**Aids knowledge test: percentages identifying true and false statements correctly and incorrectly**

	Correct %	Incorrect %	Don't Know %
You are very likely to get Aids if you are injected with a needle which has been used by someone with the virus (T)	96	2	2
A person who has the HIV virus may appear well and healthy (T)	93	2	5
A woman who has HIV cannot pass it on to a man with whom she has had sexual intercourse (F)	83	8	9
You can contract HIV via an open cut or graze (T)	81	8	11
You cannot get Aids in a swimming pool even if people who have HIV have been swimming there (T)	69	13	18
Everyone who develops Aids will eventually die as a result of it (T)	66	18	16
Everyone who has HIV will develop Aids (F)	59	18	23
You can get Aids from the saliva of someone who has HIV (F)	52	26	22
The symptoms of people dying of Aids are always the same (F)	48	19	33
You can get Aids if you are bitten by an insect which has drawn blood from someone who has the HIV virus (F)	26	25	48
There is a test which shows that a person definitely does <i>not</i> have HIV (F)	18	58	23

Base = 2826

**Note: (T) indicates statement is true, (F) indicates statement is false. Percentages denote numbers who correctly identified a true statement as being true and a false statement as being false**

would be to watch any future programmes about Aids on television. Just under one in two (47 per cent) said they would be quite likely (37 per cent) or very likely (10 per cent) to watch such programmes in future, outnumbering those who said they would not be very likely (22 per cent) or not at all likely (10 per cent) to do so. Around one in five respondents either did not know what they would do (seven per cent) or did not answer (14 per cent).

The expressed likelihood of watching future programmes about Aids on television was significantly related to being female ( $r = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ), younger

( $r = -.24, p < .001$ ) and more knowledgeable about Aids ( $r = .17, p < .001$ ). More powerful independent relationships were found between the likelihood of watching programmes about Aids in the future and current levels of interest in and claimed viewing of health and Aids-related programming. In the presence of simultaneous controls for the effects of gender, age, class and overall weight of television viewing, reported likelihood of watching Aids programmes in the future was significantly correlated with interest in health programmes ( $r = .44, p < .001$ ), reported frequency of watching health programmes ( $r = .40, p < .001$ ), having seen an Aids programme before ( $r = .33, p < .001$ ), and how recently they had watched an Aids programme ( $r = .30, p < .001$ ).

A clear majority of respondents (66 per cent) said they believed that television has a responsibility to inform people about Aids, while only a tiny minority disagreed with this view (seven per cent). Just over one in four (27 per cent) were either not sure (12 per cent) or did not answer (15 per cent). Respondents aged over 55 were the least likely of all to endorse television's responsibility (51 per cent). The view that television has a responsibility to raise public awareness was held most widely by respondents aged 16 to 44 years (76 per cent), to a lesser extent by 45-54s (66 per cent), 12-15s (63 per cent) and least of all by those aged 65 and over (51 per cent). Answers to this question were significantly correlated with gender ( $r = .07, p < .001$ ) and age ( $r = -.14, p < .001$ ), signifying that younger and female respondents believed most widely in television's responsibility to inform people about Aids. Knowledge about Aids was also significantly correlated with the latter opinion ( $r = -.12, p < .001$ ), meaning that those who scored more highly on the Aids knowledge test were more likely to acknowledge television's responsibility.

Opinion about television's responsibility to the public as an information source on Aids was also independently related to greater interest in health programmes ( $r = .21, p < .001$ ), greater frequency of watching health programmes ( $r = .17, p < .001$ ), whether an Aids programme had been seen before ( $r = .23, p < .001$ ) and how recently an Aids-related programme had been seen ( $r = .10, p < .001$ ), even when the effects of gender, age, social class and overall weight of television viewing had been taken into account.

### Perceived influences on Aids awareness

Viewers were asked to respond to a set of items designed to assess opinions about the sorts of things which might have an impact on public awareness of Aids. The different items were rated against each other to see if viewers thought some had a greater role than others in raising awareness of this health threat. For example, to what degree did viewers think television coverage of Princess Diana visiting people with Aids raised public awareness of Aids, and how did the impact of such coverage compare with an event such as the announcement by a famous person that they were HIV positive?

The two items perceived most often as having a great impact on public awareness of Aids were the news that someone famous had died of Aids (52 per

cent) and someone famous declaring themselves to be HIV positive (50 per cent). In late 1991, not long before the questionnaire was in the field, the death of Freddie Mercury of the rock group Queen had been a major news item on all television channels. Princess Diana visiting Aids sufferers followed these two events as something likely to have an impact (37 per cent). During 1991 the media had, from time to time, shown the Princess, as patron of the National Aids Trust, at the bedsides of people with Aids.

The perceived involvement of television, whether in terms of a talk show discussing the subject (17 per cent), a documentary about Aids (15 per cent), or a soap opera portrayal of a sufferer (15 per cent), was less widely seen as being likely to have a great impact, although substantial numbers of respondents thought that it could have some role to play in raising public awareness of Aids. During 1991, a character in the very popular BBC-TV soap opera *EastEnders* was diagnosed HIV positive. The least popular choices of events to publicise Aids were concerts organised to raise money for Aids research (11 per cent said they would have a great impact) and media coverage of a charity event organised by Elizabeth Taylor in support of people with Aids (four per cent). A substantial proportion of respondents (average 32 per cent) were, however, uncertain of the impact these events might have on the public.

There were some sex and age differences in these opinions. Female respondents were more likely than male respondents to feel that a television discussion programme, soap opera portrayal of a person with Aids and a concert would have an impact on public awareness. Similarly, younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to have faith in the impact of a soap character portrayal and a concert.

The relationships between demographic variables and perceived influences (impact of events) on Aids awareness were further confirmed in a series of correlational analyses. Knowledge about Aids and weight of television viewing (number of hours watched per week) were also included among these correlations (see **Table 2**). Respondents were separated into light (0-17 hours per week), medium (18-31 hours per week) and heavy (32 or more hours per week) television viewers, according to the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board's (BARB) definitions. Many of the correlations were small, but achieved statistical significance because of the large sample size from which they were derived. In view of this, a more stringent threshold was used than is usual, with correlations regarded as significant only if they achieved a level in which  $p < .001$ .

Respondent gender was correlated significantly with seven out of the eight possible Aids awareness influence factors. In each case, this result signified that females were more likely than males to endorse the effectiveness of these influences. Age correlated significantly with five out of the eight influence factors, signifying that younger respondents perceived these factors as being more effective than did older respondents. Social class was correlated significantly with four influence factors, indicating greater perceived effectiveness among working-class than

**Table 2**  
**Demographic, knowledge and viewing correlates of perceived influences on Aids awareness**

	Sex	Age	Class	Knowledge about Aids	Weight of viewing
News that someone famous had died of Aids	.18*	-.12*	.04	.05	.04
Announcement by a famous person that they have been declared HIV positive	.07*	-.17*	-.03	.09*	-.05
Media coverage of Princess Diana visiting people with Aids	.16*	-.04	.07*	.04	.09*
A discussion programme on TV with people with Aids and their families, e.g. <i>The Oprah Winfrey Show</i>	.14*	-.12*	.10*	-.02	.05
A television documentary on the subject of Aids	.10*	-.19*	-.02	.13*	-.01
A television soap featuring a popular character who has Aids	.11*	.00	.09*	-.08*	.09*
Concerts organised to raise money for Aids research	.05	.16*	.09*	-.18*	.08*

Base = 2826

\* p&lt;.001

**Table 3**  
**Health and Aids viewing correlates of perceived influences on Aids awareness**

	Ever seen programme about Aids		Recency of watching Aids programme		Interest in health programmes		Reported frequency of watching health programmes	
	Zero-order correlations	Partial correlations	Zero-order correlations	Partial correlations	Zero-order correlations	Partial correlations	Zero-order correlations	Partial correlations
News that someone famous had died of Aids	-.08	-.14*	-.06	-.08*	-.18*	-.16*	-.14*	-.14*
Announcement by a famous person that they have been declared HIV positive	-.08*	-.12*	-.03	-.09*	-.16*	-.15*	-.14*	-.14*
Media coverage of Princess Diana visiting Aids sufferers	-.10*	-.05	-.07*	-.09*	-.16*	-.15	-.17*	-.15*
A discussion programme on TV with Aids sufferers and their families, e.g. <i>The Oprah Winfrey Show</i>	-.15*	-.15*	-.05	-.13*	-.28*	-.26*	-.25*	-.23*
A television documentary on the subject of Aids	-.17*	-.18*	-.09*	-.15*	-.32*	-.38	-.27*	-.26*
A television soap featuring a popular character who has Aids	-.11*	-.12*	-.07*	-.10*	-.24*	-.21*	-.19*	-.18*
Concerts organised to raise money for Aids research	-.14*	-.04	-.09	-.12*	-.19*	-.17*	-.15*	-.15*
Media coverage of a charity event organised by Elizabeth Taylor in support of Aids	-.15*	-.15*	-.05	-.13*	-.28*	-.26*	-.25*	-.23*

\* p&lt;.001

Note: Partial correlations include simultaneous controls for sex, age, class and weight of viewing

among middle-class respondents.

Greater knowledge about Aids was associated with a greater perceived effectiveness of two factors: announcement by a famous person that they are HIV positive and a television documentary about Aids. Greater Aids knowledge was also significantly correlated with perceiving two factors as not very effective: a television soap opera featuring a character who has Aids and concerts organised to raise money for Aids research.

Overall amount of television viewing was significantly linked with four influence factors. Heavier viewers (those who watched more than 32 hours of television a week) perceived greater effectiveness for media coverage of Princess Diana visiting people with Aids; a television soap opera featuring a character with Aids; media coverage of a charity organised by Elizabeth Taylor in support of Aids; and concerts organised for Aids research.

Health educators are particularly concerned about the value of television in reaching the young, those of lower social class and those with poor knowledge of HIV and Aids. The above findings offer some support for the value of concerts, organised to raise money for Aids research, as a means of reaching those from the lower social classes, who are young and perhaps lacking in knowledge and awareness of Aids. The results also revealed that young women tended to be positive about programmes such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and television documentaries.

Further correlations were computed to examine relationships between an interest in health programmes on television, reported frequency of watching health programmes, reported watching of programmes about Aids, and each of the perceived public Aids awareness influences. **Table 3** shows both zero-order correlations and partial correlations in which controls were introduced for gender, age, class, and weight of television viewing (number of hours watched per week).

Zero-order correlations show, at a simple level, the degree of association between two variables. In this case, degrees of association were examined between television viewing and programme variables, and opinions about the impact of media events on Aids awareness. However, such simple correlations may not, in themselves, reveal a true relationship between the correlated variables. Two variables may appear as highly correlated because both hold close relationships with a third variable, such as the sex, age or social class of respondents. Partial correlations are used to control for the effects of third variables and thus to reveal whether two key variables of interest really are closely linked, regardless of other factors. The analyses revealed that most of the zero-order and partial correlations were statistically significant at the  $p < .001$  level. Thus, even when the effects of demographic variables and the overall amount of television viewing were controlled, greater interest in and claimed viewing of health programmes, along with claimed viewing of programmes about Aids, were related to a greater perceived effectiveness of various, largely media-related, public awareness-raising influences.

Interest in and viewing of health programmes were especially strongly related to the perceived effectiveness in raising public consciousness of a television documentary about Aids, a discussion programme about Aids, and a television soap opera featuring a character who supposedly has Aids.

#### *How can television cover Aids?*

Having begun to establish in broad terms what the perceived role of television is, or could be, in respect of publicising information about Aids, the survey turned its attention to ascertaining the most appropriate way in which respondents felt this could be done. They were therefore given a list of 15 television programmes and asked to say how appropriate they thought it would be to feature Aids as a subject in each of these programmes.

The results showed that eight programmes were regarded by a majority of respondents as appropriate vehicles for the inclusion of material about Aids: a documentary such as *Panorama* (86 per cent), *Casualty* (81 per cent), the national news on BBC1/ITV (78 per cent), *Eastenders* (78 per cent), morning talk shows (65 per cent), *The Bill* (62 per cent), *Everyman* (61 per cent), and the local early evening news (57 per cent). Almost one in two respondents endorsed two further programmes, namely *Brookside* (49 per cent) and *LA Law* (49 per cent). Minority endorsements were obtained by *Coronation Street* (44 per cent), evening chat shows such as *Wogan* (38 per cent), *Grange Hill* (36 per cent), *Neighbours* (36 per cent) and *Byker Grove* (24 per cent).

It is notable that only two of the programmes listed (*Grange Hill* and *Neighbours*) were thought by more than one in three respondents to be inappropriate vehicles for featuring Aids as a subject. There were clearly also doubts about the appropriateness of *Byker Grove*, *Wogan* (or other chat shows) and *Coronation Street*; to a lesser extent, respondents were dubious about *Brookside* and *LA Law*. **Table 4** shows that age was significantly correlated with strength of endorsement of every listed programme or programme type; Aids knowledge was significantly correlated with all except one item (*The Bill*), and gender was correlated with seven programme items. In all cases except one, in which gender was significantly correlated with a programme-related opinion, female respondents were more likely than males to endorse Aids messages being featured. Greater knowledge about Aids was associated with a greater likelihood of endorsing Aids as a programme topic. In every case, except *The Bill*, younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to perceive that it would be appropriate to feature Aids as a subject. In the case of *The Bill*, both female and younger respondents felt that it would not be an appropriate programme in which to headline this topic (see **Table 4**). Knowledge about Aids was unrelated to opinions linked to *The Bill*.

An interest in health programmes and greater previous experience of health and Aids-related programmes were all significantly correlated with endorsement of all listed programmes and programme types as appropriate vehicles for the examination of Aids. This was independent of any effects of gender,

**Table 4**  
**Sex, age and knowledge correlates of opinions**  
**about TV coverage of Aids**

	Sex	Age	Knowledge about Aids
Type of programmes appropriate for featuring Aids			
<i>EastEnders</i>	.05	-.21*	.22*
A documentary (eg <i>Panorama</i> )	.11*	-.21*	.17*
<i>Brookside</i>	.04	-.20*	.14*
Evening chat show (eg <i>Wogan</i> )	.06	-.15*	.11*
<i>Grange Hill</i>	.07*	-.07*	.21*
<i>Everyman</i>	.05	-.13*	.14*
<i>Coronation Street</i>	.14*	-.20*	.15*
<i>LA Law</i>	.03	-.08*	.09*
<i>Byker Grove</i>	.05	-.09*	.11*
<i>Neighbours</i>	.01	-.26*	.19*
National news (BBC 9 o'clock), (ITN <i>News at Ten</i> )	-.03	-.22*	.17*
Local early evening news	.09*	-.27*	.14*
Morning talk show ( <i>The Time . . . The Place</i> )	.09*	-.25*	.17*
<i>Casualty</i>	.11*	-.24*	.19*
<i>The Bill</i>	-.12*	.13*	-.02

Base = 2826

\*  $p < .001$

age, class or overall weight of viewing, and regardless of a dramatic or factual context. In other words, those individuals with an interest in (and presumably an accompanying level of concern about) Aids felt that television in general should give coverage to the subject.

### Discussion

This survey explored a range of attitudes of members of a national UK television viewing panel towards the role of television in enhancing public awareness of Aids. This panel is exceedingly useful to the broadcast industry as a tool for gauging public reaction to various aspects of television programming. The industry strives to ensure that panel members are representative of the UK population, but it is likely that agreement to being a panel member for two years reveals something about members' literacy and motivation (in terms of willingness to fill in and return a postal questionnaire) and interest in the media, both of which are likely to be greater than those of the average person in the street. However, since the specific aim of this study was to examine public interest in, and opinions of health programming on television, these potential

differences were regarded as advantages, rather than drawbacks.

Amongst the 3,000 respondents, there was a generally pervasive interest in watching programmes about health-related issues, although it was also clear that different topics attract different viewers depending on their personal interest in the subject. This is an important finding in view of the growing opinion that persuasive health messages, designed not simply to impart knowledge, but to change behaviour, need to be more carefully targeted. In particular, Aids prevention messages, conveyed via the mass media, should contain material that is consonant with a social or cultural group's beliefs, attitudes, values and subjective norms of conduct<sup>22</sup>.

A majority of viewers questioned in this survey claimed to have seen at least one programme about Aids in the past. More than half of these individuals reported having watched such a programme during the last month. Interest in programmes about Aids showed no signs of waning. The great majority of respondents claimed to be at least as interested in the subject now as they had been five years earlier. These initial opinions indicate a potential for television to play an active and constructive part in informing the public about Aids. Further opinions indicated that the public still has a need to be informed. Although nearly three out of four respondents in the present survey claimed to know more about Aids now than they did five years ago, and some six in ten felt they knew a great deal or quite a bit about Aids, there was still a sizeable number who admitted to relative ignorance about Aids. This was true for all categories of respondent, regardless of sex, age or social class.

There was no indication of widespread dissatisfaction with the amount of Aids coverage on television and respondents were also more likely to say they would watch, rather than avoid, future Aids coverage. There was clear majority endorsement of the responsibility of television to inform the public about Aids, in particular among the younger age group. Respondents felt that certain events, whether staged or not, could potentially have a great impact on public awareness. News of a famous person dying of Aids or announcing that they are HIV positive were cited much more often as having a great impact than was any other form of publicity. The association of a member of the royal family, namely Princess Diana, with an event involving people with Aids, a television discussion programme that featured victims and their families, a television documentary about Aids, and a television soap opera featuring a character with Aids, were all perceived as having moderate impact. Special concerts and charity events were seen as potentially effective by fewer respondents.

Our results are consistent with previous research which has observed a belief among the public that media coverage of well-known celebrities who suffer from Aids can have a lasting impact<sup>10</sup>. The findings of the previous study were obtained from young people. In the current study, this opinion was also significantly more likely to be held by the young adult and teenage respondents. In addition to demographic differences in opinion, greater interest in and claimed viewing of

health-related programmes, and claimed viewing of programmes about Aids, were related to greater perceived effectiveness of various forms of mass-mediated Aids publicity. Those with greater concern about the subject tended to have more sympathy with the messages.

Finally, on the question on how television can best cover Aids, several different kinds of programme were endorsed by a majority of respondents as appropriate vehicles for Aids publicity; namely, documentary, talk show and drama formats. By asking respondents to indicate their opinions about particular *named* programmes rather than about genres of programme, however, it became clear that not all specific exemplars of a particular programme type were thought to be equally appropriate for publicising Aids. It seems likely, however, that the opinions given here do not simply reflect a judgement about how effective a particular programme could be at raising public awareness, but also reflect personal taste; the subject of Aids would not be fitting for many viewers in the context of certain programmes. Judgements here are probably influenced by programme schedules and beliefs about the nature of the audience at that time (for example, one likely to have large numbers of children watching), the style of the programme (such as a serious issue talk show versus one deemed to be light entertainment), and possibly an image of a programme, gained through past experience, as one which covers important social issues (note the differences in opinion about *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*). Nevertheless, few programme types are dismissed as potential vehicles for raising public awareness. Subject to advertising, and appropriate style or 'tastefulness' of treatment, many viewers perceived an important role for practically all areas of television in informing the public about Aids.

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