

## Tip Sheet 12

### What can we do when politicians ignore the evidence?

Although we hope that our Government and health system will follow evidence-based policies, all too often they do not. They may base their actions and decisions on morality, or economy, or even just political expediency and then come up with arguments for what they want to do – sometimes referred to as “policy-based evidence”.

No country is immune from this. The spectacular examples, such as Russia's refusal to bring its HIV epidemic under control, are accompanied by the quiet refusal of almost every European country except Portugal to follow the evidence on decriminalisation of drug use as part of successful harm reduction. Many countries still won't accept that good quality sex and relationships education reduces unwanted pregnancies and delays sexual activity. For some people, and particularly politicians, facts can mean less than faith or political partisanship. So what can you do when a policymaker or politician is ignoring the evidence you bring to them?

- **Identify the motivation for their decisions** - what are the reasons they are acting as they do? If you know what is motivating them, you can work on that. If it is political partisanship, you can work towards a cross-party coalition of experts or find the people on their side who agree with you and can influence them. If it's money, you can make financial arguments more prominent about long term costs. If it's morality or religion, that can be harder and need a lot of patience but you can use their own belief system to talk about the morality of the consequences of their actions, or try to identify people in their religion who will speak for you.
- **Find people they will listen to and influence them** – who do they respect that agrees with you? A politician may only listen to a fellow politician that they can see has done well; a public health leader may listen to one from another country who has a good international reputation. Find their peers or the people that they admire, and support them to make your case for you.
- **Show how much international respect other people have got for making the right decision** – this works best with smaller countries or people who want to build their reputation. Every leader wants to be thought wise and every manager recognised for their abilities.
- **Shape public opinion** – many politicians are only really impacted by three things; their own party, the voters/general public and the media. If you can show a politician that your cause is popular, or likely to make them popular, you have a better chance of changing their mind. With sexual health issues like HIV, it can work the other way around and you may have to persuade them that doing what you suggest won't be as unpopular as they fear. With some issues, such as self-testing, it may be inertia or vested interests inside the health system that hold them back when the public tend to be in favour, once they are engaged on the issue.
- **Use the media** – if those in power won't listen to you directly, make noise in the media. Human interest stories, simple survey data, clear explanations of injustice or waste of resources can all get headlines. This is particularly helpful in arguing with health systems who are less used to robust public scrutiny.

- **Educate the opposition** – this must be done carefully, because if your cause becomes identified with one party, it may not be supported by others. But every opposition is always looking for things to argue with the Government about, or use to show that they are incompetent. Provide your data and suggestions for change to all parties and you may find that some of them will help you hold the Government to account.

Of course, none of these may work, or you may be within a system that responds better to public demonstrations than private persuasion. In this case, you may want to study campaigns such as the French PrEP campaign (case study 3) or the Greek resistance to criminalisation of sex workers (case study 4). Strategies include:

- **Public demonstrations** – these can be mass demonstrations, but often a small number of people can get media and public attention with a theatrical gesture such as pouring red paint (= blood) on Ministry steps, or graffiti in public places. Of course, there are legal issues here and you must think these through carefully, but the case studies show that these can be effective as part of a wider campaign.
- **Awareness raising** – it only takes a small number of people to sticker or graffiti an area to raise awareness of an issue with those living or working there. This also gives the impression of a large campaign.
- **International embarrassment** – taking the issue to showcase events. This can be as simple as comparative data being presented in scientific conferences, but can also be more blunt. One example was the Barcelona World AIDS Conference where activists persuaded many people, including influential leaders, to wear stickers protesting the US entry ban on people with HIV. This raised awareness of the issue with US attendees, many of whom were previously unaware of their own Government's policy, and horrified by it. This in turn contributed to internal moves within the US to change it. But, as with all these tactics, be aware of the possible backlash – the US Government did abolish the ban eventually, but they also drastically cut their support for attendance at the next conference in retaliation.

Searching the internet will find you many other examples of strategies to resist or challenge poor decision making. But always be aware that, in the end, someone will be needed to talk to the policymakers to help them once they decide to do the right thing – try not to burn all your bridges along the way.

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