

Sudan's media laws frustrate drives on AIDS and genital mutilation

Peter Moszynski *London*

A growing clampdown on the press is affecting public health campaigns in Sudan, just as a breakdown in peace talks dashed hopes of ending one of the world's most intractable civil wars.

On 11 September the campaigning group Human Rights Watch wrote to President Omar al Bashir, condemning the recent crackdown. The group said, "In the past week, following the government's withdrawal from peace talks in Nairobi with rebel forces, the governmental National Press Council has confiscated newspapers for publishing

allegedly subversive articles and security forces have detained, harassed, and interrogated newspaper editors and journalists."

"Subversion" includes criticism of the breakdown of the peace talks—"threatening the unity of the state"—and discussing female circumcision.

Sudan's AIDS campaigners complain of a lack of political commitment to public health education, as editors shy away from publishing stories that fall foul of the country's rigid obscenity laws, which also hamper the campaign against female

genital mutilation.

"We are still waiting for the media to play its vital role in the AIDS control programme," said Dr Ibrahim Mohamed Abdallah of the Sudan National AIDS Control Programme. Despite widespread popular participation in a national advocacy week, the campaign received virtually no press coverage.

"The fact that HIV/AIDS is primarily spread through sexual intercourse makes it a sensitive issue. This is a difficulty that people all around the world have had to confront. Here in Sudan we must ask how many people have to die and how many people have to get infected before we overcome this sensitivity," said Unicef representative Thomas Ekvall at a football tournament launching the campaign.

Twenty years of civil war and the government's policies have provided fertile ground for a huge increase in HIV infection. Aid agencies claim that the civil war has created "the greatest humanitarian emergency on earth."

The crackdown is also hampering the drive against female genital mutilation.

Human Rights Watch protested about this in its letter to the president. "On August 24, the official National Press Council suspended for one day the publication of another Khartoum newspaper, *Al Ayam*, after it published a piece on female

genital mutilation reportedly still widely practised in Sudan although illegal. It is not possible to understand why this issue of *Al Ayam* should be suspended in view of the government's official position against female genital mutilation," it said.

North Sudan has one of the world's highest incidences of female circumcision. A 1990 demographic and health survey found that 89% of married women had undergone some form of genital mutilation.

Campaigners accuse the government of encouraging the practice while gagging its critics. The National Press Council deemed the paper's coverage "a slur on public decency." Omdurman Islamic University recently established a centre for training traditional birth attendants to perform the procedure.

On 22 May a workshop organised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowment was held at the university's centre for female students. The workshop recommended the legalisation of female circumcision, raising awareness of its "importance," and supporting the efforts of the female student centre to establish centres all over the country.

The Sudanese Women's Rights Group warned: "FGM [female genital mutilation] causes not only physical and mental health problems, but can lead to death as serious infections often occur." □



Human rights campaigners have protested to President Omar al Bashir (pictured above, centre) about his media crackdown

Patients get access to evidence based, online health information

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

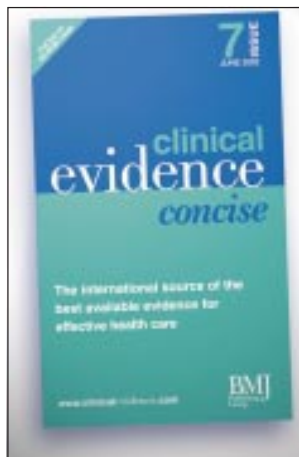
Patients this week got online access to two evidence based sources of healthcare information: the Cochrane Library, published by Update Software, and *Clinical Evidence*, published by the BMJ Publishing Group.

The step was due to be announced at the International eHealth Association's annual conference in London this week. Public access to the sources is through the National electronic Library for Health (NeLH) (www.nelh.nhs.uk).

A recent poll conducted for the BMJ Publishing Group found that 88% of GPs sur-

veyed said that they had patients who brought health information gathered from the internet to the consultation. About 60% of the GPs recommended that patients explore online health information sources, but less than half guided their patients to specific online sources.

The initiative is aimed at enabling doctors to recommend comprehensive and reliable sources of information to their patients, as well as reassuring patients that they have access to the same information as their doctors.



"Both the Cochrane Library and *Clinical Evidence* offer in-depth information that 'expert patients' or those who want to view the same information as their own doctor, will find use-

ful," said Dr Muir Gray, director of the National electronic Library for Health.

At the same time that open access to *Clinical Evidence* has been achieved, 50 000 print copies of the reference book have been sent to all GPs and key clinical service points and trusts throughout the country.

Copies of the full, unabridged version of issue 6 have been distributed with the concise edition of issue 7. In future, GPs will receive only the concise edition, which will contain a CD Rom of the full version.

All GP practices are to receive four copies. If additional copies are needed, GPs are asked to phone the NHS response line (08710 555 455). □

Clinical Evidence can be accessed at www.clinicalevidence.nhs.uk