Inaccurate Reporting of HIV Prevention Research: A Look at the Zimbabwean Experiences
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Background: Zimbabwe is one of the countries that are actively involved in HIV prevention clinical trials in Southern Africa. However, these trials are not very well understood by the general Zimbabwean population and the media as well. Following the closure of the FEM-PrEP clinical trial and closure/unblinding of the oral Truvada (emtricitabine/tenofovir disoproxil fumarate) Arm of the VOICE Study, one of the local newspapers wrote an article titled, “HIV- Negative Zimbabwean Women Test Positive After Drug Trials,” which highlighted that 127 Zimbabwean women who were HIV negative were feared to be HIV positive after participating in trials. The above mentioned article is one of the few that exposes the misconceptions and little knowledge the Zimbabwean media and the general public have with regards to HIV prevention trials.

Methods: Our organization, being the National Ethics Committee, requires that all adverts and newspaper articles on studies be submitted for review before they are released. This ensures that the public is not misinformed. Our organization has an open door policy and has held several meetings with journalists to explain to them the importance of research ethics and accurate reporting on research studies, especially those that are very complicated like the HIV prevention trials. Our organization also holds Annual Health Research Forums to which the Minister of Health, government officials, researchers, and the media are invited.

Results: The media in Zimbabwe still needs to be informed on HIV research prevention research and its importance in the fight against HIV. Our organization is planning to host a forum for the media and researchers where health research matters; HIV prevention research included would be discussed.

Conclusions: Regulators should foster good relations with journalists and put in place measures that encourage researchers to have media and communication protocols in place. Researchers should be involved in developing media programmes that educate and inform communities about ongoing and future trials. Researchers should equip themselves with skills on how to deal with the media, and design approaches to involve journalists during both “good” and “controversial” moments. In collaboration with local organizations, they could conduct short trainings for journalists covering basic knowledge on HIV/AIDS and clinical trials with emphasis on research ethics and the drug development process. Whenever there is inaccurate reporting, both researchers and the media should work together to communicate the accurate information to the public. Editors should provide room for both researchers and journalists to give their views on research.