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Kaiser Family Foundation Tutorial Choosing the Right Words July 21, 2008

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[START RECORDING]

JACKIE JUDD: Have you ever been tripped up in the use of language in the context of an AIDS story?

CZERNE REID: Not in the writing of it, but in the reporting of it. And I have found that people with HIV/AIDS can be very sensitive and understandably so. One thing is when you are talking about different risk groups, the whole idea of men who have sex with men.

And I have learned now not to say gay or homosexual because there are many men who have sex with men who do not identify as gay. So, you have to be sensitive to figure out how they self-identify and then use that language.

RENATA SIMONE: One pet peeve is mine is HIV virus, which of course, HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. So, if you say HIV virus, you are saying virus twice. On the other hand, saying the HIV can sound awkward. So, I guess you have to listen to it by ear but it is good to know when you are doing it, it is like that thing when you break a rule, you should know what rule you are breaking. So, I would say HIV HIV instead of the HIV virus.

Another one is AIDS test. The AIDS test is the test for the antibody. The western blot test for the virus itself is time consuming and very expensive and in general, is not given to people. What they do test for is the antibody to the virus which is that first push that your body makes.

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JACKIE JUDD: So, what is the right language to use?

RENATA SIMONE: The correct language, instead of saying AIDS test, would be HIV antibody test or if you needed to say AIDS virus antibody test. But, it is to the antibody, not the virus.

CZERNE REID: Another point I think of sensitivity is the difference between HIV and AIDS. And people who are infected with HIV are upset if you say they have AIDS. I suppose it is within the disease condition, there is still a sort of stigma to say whether you have HIV or whether you have advanced to the later stage.

And that one was also a state conference where it was a group of people who were living with AIDS and who were discussing various topics that affected them and they made a clear point of that someone actually referenced a story I had written, they did not call my name, but I knew that it was about AIDS and it was in the state newspaper, it was mine. They took issue with the whole thing of saying AIDS instead of saying HIV. So, what I do now, is I just do HIV/AIDS and that covers everyone.

RENATA SIMONE: Bodily fluids, they say contact with bodily fluids. Well, not all bodily fluids contain HIV or have the potential to contain HIV. So, saying bodily fluids is not accurate scientifically. And where it is possible, it is good to specify whether it is blood or semen or vaginal fluid. But

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of course, urine, tears, so we do not have HIV so we do not want to confuse people.

Another one is safe sex. I think after all these years we understand that there is really is not completely safe sex, it is safer sex. So, you advocate using condoms for safer sex, not 100-percent safe sex.

BRENDA WILSON: I think one that is very confusing for many people to use is orphans and vulnerable children and I think that may serve the organizations that came up with that construct. If a child has lost both parents, I may say orphans with ease; believe that it will not be confusing.

But, often people are talking about orphans and they are talking about a child who has lost one parent. And then it can be confusing because people do not think they have any living parents. So, what I often do is, instead I just say what I mean. I think sometimes the best thing to do is not use a label or a phrase in just saying the child had lost her mother or lost both parents.

RENATA SIMONE: IV drug abuser, those have negative connotations and they are not helpful because not only are they hurtful to people whose behavior you might be trying to describe, but it is stigmatizing and allows other people to put them in a category of them. So, it becomes us versus them.

And that is just not helpful in the fight against AIDS. As you know, it is all about behavior and so if you say

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prostitute, you can say a woman who is working as a sex worker or a person who is using drugs and if you need a noun, it is an IV drug user, not abuser. And it is a person living with AIDS or a person living with HIV/AIDS.

JACKIE JUDD: Have you ever had to argue with an editor about the use of certain types of language and words and the editor says look, you are being politically correct. And what is the conversation like and how do you win?

RENATA SIMONE: I am smiling because I cannot even begin to count the number of times, especially about AIDS victim, AIDS victim or innocent victim where I feel very strongly that making a distinction between innocent and guilty victims is not helpful in the fight against the epidemic. It is not helpful in educating people.

And I have had that fight many times with people who pound the table and say no, this person is a victim and this person is innocent and we need to say it that way. I have never put my name on anything that I have lost that battle and I have never taken my name off anything.

So, I think the worst that has ever happened is I let it go for the next draft and fought the battle again the next day. And when people know that I am really serious about that, we just take it out.

CZERNE REID: Often what I will do when I am with my editors, explain why I have used something and I will write

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notes to say, okay, make sure because things get changed as they go through the copy desk for language, gay might be shorter than homosexual or gay is definitely shorter than men who have sex with men. So, they want to save some space so they might change something and sometimes I will put notes to say make sure this is not changes.

And that is a challenge of being a newspaper reporter. I am sure in any kind of reporting is that there are lots of other people who see and touch a story before it gets into the paper.

JOHN DONNELLY: I have two general rules about this. One is to try to make my copy as clear as possible. So, that there is as little jargon in it if I can edit out. The second rule though is to present people who are HIV positive as any other people.

Besides that, I try to explain things as I see them and if you come to them with a mind that they are no different from anyone else, you treat them as you would any person in any story and I think if that is your perspective, that sort of gets away from any kind of bias or prejudice you may have against them.

[END RECORDING]

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