

ETHICS GUIDELINES

This material was developed for and endorsed by the Southern Africa Editors' Forum; more information can be found at www.journaids.org/docs/SAEF_ethical_principles.pdf. We are grateful for permission to reprint this material.

HIV and AIDS is a story of critical importance that should be covered by journalists with imagination, initiative and sensitivity to gender and the larger social forces driving the epidemic.

The story requires reporting of the highest ethical standards. The Southern African Editors' Forum (SAEF) and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) endorsed these principles to provide guidance to media councils, training institutions and media companies, as well as individual editors and journalists. The principles are not cast in stone but should be revised over time and in response to the unfolding epidemic.

- Accuracy is critical, since important personal and policy decisions may be influenced by media reports. Journalists should be particularly careful to get scientific and statistical information right. Facts should be painstakingly checked, using credible sources to interpret information, verify facts and make statistics and science accessible and relevant to wide audiences. Sources should be named as often as possible. Stories should be written in context.
- Misconceptions should be debunked, and any claims of cures or treatments should be reported with due care. Journalists should look at all stories critically.
- Clarity means being prepared to discuss sex, cultural practices and other sensitive issues respectfully but openly. Care should be taken to ensure language, cultural norms and traditional practices relating to, for example, inheritance and sex are understood and accurately reported taking into account universal human rights.
- Balance means giving due weight to the story, and covering all aspects, including medical, social, political, economic and other issues. Balance also means highlighting positive stories where appropriate, without underplaying the fact that HIV and AIDS is a serious crisis.
- Journalists should hold all decision-makers to account in their handling of the pandemic, from government to the pharmaceutical industry and advocacy groups. They should be engaged with, but not captive to, any interest group.
- Journalists should ensure that the voices and images of people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS are heard and seen. The human face of the pandemic should be shown. They should take care that the voices heard are diverse, and include those of women and men, vulnerable and marginalized people.
- Journalists should respect the rights of people with HIV and AIDS. Vulnerable people should be treated with particular care. Journalists should seek informed consent before intruding on anyone's privacy. They should seek to understand the possible consequences for individuals who participate in their report, and to ensure those individuals are clear about the consequences. Only in cases of overwhelming public interest can somebody's HIV status be reported against their wishes or should journalists hide their professional identity.
- Journalists should be aware of and seek out the gender dimensions of all aspects of the pandemic, from prevention to treatment and care, as this will add to the depth and context, as well as reveal new areas for reporting.

- Particular care should be taken in dealing with children. They experience the most extreme consequences of the epidemic, and their rights to privacy should be afforded even greater protection. They should only be identified if the public interest is overwhelming, and then only if no harm to them is foreseeable and they and any parents or guardians have given informed consent. Children have the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. They also have the right to be heard, and journalists should ensure that the particular concerns they face are covered.
- Discrimination, prejudice and stigma are very harmful, and journalists should avoid fuelling them. Particular care should be taken not to use language, or images, that reinforce stereotypes.