U.S. Agency for International Development

Bureau for Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Vietnamese Barbers Serve as Unlikely Messengers

Barber Tien snips away at the mop of dark hair in front of him, chatting with a young customer. "You really must use condoms if you are sleeping with more than one woman because you don't know who could have AIDS," he says as he trims. "What if you got AIDS and then passed it on to your wife?"

The slim man in the barber's chair tilts his head backward as Tien reaches for his razor. "But condoms don't feel comfortable," the customer says. Tien, not missing a beat, responds, "Maybe you aren't using them properly? Besides, isn't it better to be safe?"[1]

THIS IS A SCENE that plays out weekly in the busy Vietnamese port city of Hai Phong, where 65 barbers work as HIV/AIDS peer educators to reach thousands of young men vulnerable to infection. The two-year-old project, managed by Family Health International (FHI) with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), targets four Vietnamese cities where HIV infection rates are high due to low condom use, migratory work patterns, availability of commercial sex, and pervasive injecting drug use.

> All told, the program has provided HIV/AIDS peer education training to more than 150 Vietnamese barbers, reaching more than 90,000 male customers with HIV/AIDS messages.

Participating barbers take part in one- or two-day training courses and receive specially made equipment and uniforms, including awnings, barber mirrors, trays, jackets, hats, and client aprons embossed with the project logo. They also receive supplies of condoms for sale and special government permits to carry out their work, legitimizing their status as health educators.

The barbers work in teams of ten at barber shops set up against walls edging city sidewalks, and they take their task seriously. Their mirrors display stickers that read "How can condoms help you? Make you happier, more civilized and safer in the face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic." "Condoms are wonderful to stop AIDS," and "Sharing needles is bad." And underneath shelves stacked with scissors lie comics and flyers on HIV, which has infected at least 67,100 Vietnamese. Eighty-five percent of the country's known HIV/AIDS cases occur among men, and most are young and sexually active.

Photo courtesy of Tran Thi Hoa

A Vietnamese barber discusses HIV prevention with a customer.

Thomas Kane, Vietnam director for FHI, explains that in a country where access to mass media is limited, one-to-one communication is vital in preventing further spread of an epidemic that many are uncomfortable talking about. "Interacting with their peers … can be a very effective way to communicate messages on how they can protect themselves and their families," he says.

The barber initiative has been so successful in reaching the young men of Hai Phong that FHI launched similar projects in Cam Pha and Ha Long, in Quang Ninh province, and in Ha Noi in mid-2002. All told, the program has provided HIV/AIDS peer education training to more than 150

[1] Excerpted from "A Sharp Message: Viet Nam Barbers Spread Anti-AIDS message." *Bangkok Post*, October 8, 2001, by Angela Takats/Reuters.

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Vietnamese barbers, reaching more than 90,000 male customers with HIV/AIDS messages. A 2001 study found that 24 percent of long-distance truck drivers in Hai Phong, a group particularly vulnerable to HIV, had visited project barbers.

And the barbers say the project has been good for business. Customers receiving HIV/AIDS information have returned more frequently for haircuts because they view the barbers as trustworthy.

"It's not only the public who is benefiting from this campaign," notes Kane. "It is also doing wonders for the self-esteem of the barbers and shoe shiners … they know they are making a difference."

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