

Cricket stars to plug HIV messages
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Top cricketers are to feature in a series of public service announcements (PSA) highlighting the plight of children and young people living with and affected by HIV. The messages would be aired in the run-up to and during the Cricket World Cup season.

This is being done as part of a partnership between the International Cricket Council (ICC), UNAIDS and UNICEF, and it is also driven by a decision of the ICC to dedicate the 2007 Cricket World Cup (CWC) to the global campaign "Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS".

The partnership was officially launched yesterday in all the host countries of the CWC 2007 games and here in Guyana at the Players Dining Area at the National Stadium at Providence.

Under the collaboration, a series of PSAs have been produced, each lasting 30 seconds, which would be available to broadcasters free of charge.

The team in a statement said that they would feature leading players including Ricky Ponting from Australia and Rahul Dravid from India, speaking about how HIV affects children. As part of the campaign too, players and officials from each team will wear the red and blue ribbon of the 'Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS' campaign during their first games and during the final. In addition to this players will also visit programmes supporting children and young people affected by the disease.

The statement also said that sports stars such as top cricketers can act as role models for today's young generation and reach out to them on AIDS issues.

"Sports is a force for change that can break down barriers, build self-esteem and teach life skills and social behaviour. By highlighting AIDS issues, the ICC Cricket World Cup and its cricketing stars are showing exactly the kind of exceptional response needed for the exceptional challenges of AIDS," the statement quoted UNAIDS Executive Director Dr. Peter Piot as saying.

Speaking at the launching ceremony yesterday, acting UNAIDS country coordinator Dr. Kathleen Israel noted that the partnership with such an esteemed sporting event and with people who are sporting stars and who people look up to gives attention to the issue of HIV.

"We believe that this will be the most important global collective spotlight that could be put on the problem," she said.

She said that with the number of television viewers expected to tune in to the seven-week long ICC games the real target audience would be watching.

"It would have an impact since some of them look at the sports stars as role models and so they could internalize the messages while they are looking at cricket," she asserted.

She said that the organisations have come together to put more emphasis on the issues surrounding HIV/AIDS and urged that once prevention strategies are effective the impact could be greater. And this is one area, she added, that the messages would target along with prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT), paying attention to orphans as a result of the disease, and working to ensure access to anti-retroviral treatment (ARVs) for children who have been infected by the disease.

And Minister of Sport Frank Anthony acknowledged that the launch of the partnership was not only timely but important and noted too that in order to deal with the disease, partnerships are essential.

"HIV is a big problem in the world and is indeed a very serious challenge and so any collaboration and coalition that could help to focus attention to get people to see the real issue and help with the prevention drive, is a welcome initiative," the minister said.

Anthony, who is also chairman of the Local Organising Committee, said that CWC had great potential to reach a lot of people in the world and the partnership provided an opportunity to reach them with messages about how the world could prevent the disease.

He quoted UNAIDS statistics which indicated that some 2.9 million persons had died from the disease last year, close to 27,000 persons became infected with the disease last year while some 19,000 children were living with the disease.

"So I am happy that UNICEF has come on board and we could bring more light to the situation and think about children that have suffered as a result of the disease," he asserted.

ICC is also being supported in this effort by the Caribbean Broadcast Media Partnership on HIV/AIDS (CBMP), a coalition of over 50 broadcasters in 23 Caribbean countries and territories.

The CBMP'S new regional media campaign, LIVE UP, aims to inspire the people of the Caribbean, especially youths, to consider what they can do to stem the spread of HIV, the team said.

It said too that the CBMP was in the process of producing a series of televised public service announcements as part of an ongoing media campaign targeting young people. This would be launched by Caribbean broadcasters during the event, the statement said.

Additionally these spots, it said, would encourage young people to take action to prevent HIV infection, including talking openly with parents, teachers and friends about HIV and being informed, in addition to using protection and getting tested.

The ICC games are scheduled to start with an opening ceremony on March 11 in Jamaica and will run for seven weeks across nine Caribbean countries. (Heppilena Ferguson)