

VOLUNTARY MEDICAL MALE CIRCUMCISION (VMMC)

A GUIDE TO WORKING WITH THE MEDIA TO PROMOTE VMMC IN KENYA

2012



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Communication for Change (C-Change) Project
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Reporting on VMMC: Challenges and Solutions.....	2
Developing a Media Plan and Media List.....	4
Getting VMMC on the Agenda of Editorial Boards.....	8
Hosting a Media Event or Photo Opportunity	9
Writing a Press Release and Media Advisory	10
Holding a News Conference	14
Being Interviewed by Broadcast Media	15
Writing Letters to the Editor and Op-eds.....	16
Responding to Misinformation and Negative Reporting.....	18
Assessing the Effort to Engage the Media.....	20
References.....	21
Annex: Background to VMMC in Kenya	22

INTRODUCTION

In Kenya and many other countries, the reach and enormous influence of the media—print, television, radio, and the internet—contribute to shaping public opinion, setting agendas, and framing issues. Some theories suggest that media attention for a specific issue promotes public awareness and momentum for change. Research also shows that the amount of coverage an issue receives is strongly related to the public’s perception of its importance and any policy actions that result. In other words, the mass media can influence what issues people are concerned about, how they think about them, and, ultimately, what action is taken.

Radio provides adults in Kenya with most of their news and general information, followed by television and newspapers. Because these media are trusted and seen as accurate by many, they play a vital role as voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) programs are rolled out and scaled up as a key HIV-prevention practice.

For VMMC programs to be successful, Kenyans need to be informed about the benefits of VMMC and the importance of maintaining HIV-preventative behaviors after circumcision, and media channels provide the best ways of communicating this information to a larger audience. VMMC programs may need guidance on working with media outlets to increase uptake of services and counteract myths and misconceptions about male circumcision.

Background on VMMC in Kenya

After findings from randomized control trials in Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa indicated that VMMC provides up to 60 percent protection for men against heterosexually acquired HIV infections, the Government of Kenya took the lead in rolling out VMMC services, based on technical guidance from UNAIDS and the World Health Organization. The National Male Circumcision (MC) Task Force set up under the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation in July 2007 identified Nyanza as the priority region for services, based on the province’s high HIV prevalence and the low rate of male circumcision among the Luo, the majority group in the province.

Luo men have been ridiculed by other ethnic groups for whom male circumcision is a rite of passage into adulthood and a traditional cultural practice. VMMC and the rollout of services became highly political issues during the run up to national elections in late 2007, when the Honorable Raila Odinga, a Luo from Nyanza, ran for president. After stories of forced circumcisions, the Government of Kenya responded by making concerted efforts at national and local levels to engage the Luo Council of Elders and communities in advocacy and support for VMMC. For more information, please see the Annex.

Purpose of the Guide and Intended Users

This guide was developed for VMMC program directors, task force leaders, and communication managers who need to engage the media. It outlines how to foster positive relationships with media professionals in order to get accurate and increased coverage of VMMC issues. The task of getting high quality and accurate media coverage for VMMC should not be restricted to seasoned communication professionals.

The genesis of this guide was a consultation held on behalf of two task forces—the National VMMC Task Force and the Nyanza Provincial VMMC Task Force—and a one-day workshop with 22 journalists from 11 media houses in

Nyanza Province. In attendance were representatives of three newspapers—*The Nation*, *The Standard*, and *The People*; two television stations, Nation TV and KTN-TV; and six radio stations: Citizen TV/Radio, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), Radio Ramogi FM, Radio Nam Lolwe FM, Radio Lake Victoria FM, and Radio Sahara.

The Star

Kenya Leads Africa in Male Circumcision

03 Nov 2011, Nairobi

A World Health Organization (WHO) report on the progress of voluntary medical male circumcision shows that out of the 555,022 circumcised men in 13 sub-Saharan African countries, 327,479 were circumcised in Kenya...

Why Partner with the Media?

Partnering with the media makes it possible to significantly increase the dissemination of accurate information about VMMC services.

Weak partnerships and poor media coverage contribute to fear of VMMC, misinformation, decreased demand for VMMC services, and less support for VMMC from policymakers.

REPORTING ON VMMC: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

VMMC programs should be aware of the challenges journalists face in reporting on VMMC. Those attending the C-Change workshop listed the following obstacles to increased and accurate coverage:

- *Cultural opposition:* VMMC is still perceived negatively in some non-circumcising communities. Media professionals are sometimes accused of embracing a culture that is not theirs.
- *The complex science behind VMMC:* HIV risk-reduction percentages and other complex issues about VMMC are difficult to communicate to the general public, especially those with lower literacy levels. Some journalists may be intimidated by this.
- *Conflicting editorial priorities and preferences:* Editors decide what issues “get ink” and airtime, based on perceived newsworthiness and established priorities. Journalists may not be able to push VMMC items that editors do not wish to publish.

We have serious challenges when it comes to reporting accurately on VMMC since most of the information about VMMC is heavy science... When you say that VMMC reduces HIV by 60 percent, it becomes very challenging to communicate this...to the public... As journalists, we need communication materials that we can use to effectively communicate with the public on VMMC.

—Kepher, Journalist,
The Standard, Kisumu

Engaging the Media on VMMC Issues

Journalists at the workshop provided the following advice on how programs can obtain media coverage that mobilizes and educates the public on VMMC issues:

- Provide information on VMMC that simplifies the science.
- Highlight the advantages and risks of VMMC.
- Ensure two-way communication, including letters to the editor, call-in radio shows, and discussions led by experts.

VMMC is not a naturally high-profile topic, so program directors, task force leaders, and communication managers should welcome the chance to engage with journalists and simplify issues for their audiences. Those working to promote VMMC need to help journalists develop compelling and interesting story angles to increase coverage and uptake of VMMC services. Engaging the media and raising the visibility of a VMMC program requires patience, creativity, and a good story. It may be hard work, but the effort can pay off and contribute to reducing HIV infection and transmission.

When planning this engagement, the following questions should be considered:

- How can mass media influence public opinion on VMMC?
- Would increased media coverage of VMMC help change the perceptions of policymakers and the public about its importance?
- How can media coverage of VMMC be expanded and improved?



Journalists face challenges in reporting on VMMC.

DEVELOPING A MEDIA PLAN AND MEDIA LIST

An effective media plan helps to identify key content that will be conveyed through different media channels. It also covers how the information will be disseminated to these outlets.

VMMC programs should consider the following questions in developing media plans:

- What are the goals in engaging the media?
- Who are the main audiences for the messages and information?
- What is the main content that needs to be communicated?
- What are some good story angles? (One example might be an interview with a satisfied couple; another could be a story about increased demand for VMMC.)
- What will get people's attention or will interest, shock, or entertain them?
- What staff, materials, budget, and partner support are needed?

The media plan needs to identify secondary audiences that influence the primary audiences. If the primary audience for a media plan is journalists, then the secondary audience is likely to be editors who decide what stories will be covered. The plan should also specify how media and policymakers will be engaged.

Sample Media Plan

Goals

- To support accurate media coverage of VMMC, including the benefits, the healing period after surgery, and available VMMC services
- To encourage journalists to see VMMC as a newsworthy topic

Audiences

Primary audience: Print and radio journalists who cover health and development topics in Nyanza Province

Secondary audience: Editors who decide what stories and topics will be featured by media outlets in Nyanza Province

Content to be communicated:

- Male circumcision works. Scientific evidence clearly shows that male circumcision reduces the risk of HIV infection for heterosexual men by about 60 percent.
- VMMC does not offer total protection from HIV. It is important to follow other HIV-prevention behaviors, such as practicing abstinence, being faithful to one partner, and using condoms correctly and consistently.
- Women can play an important role, especially when they encourage their partners to get circumcised.
- After the circumcision procedure, resting at home for one or two days will help the wound to heal. There is also a need to avoid sexual intercourse for six weeks.
- It is good to openly discuss HIV and

VMMC among friends.

- VMMC services are free of charge at local clinics.

Story angles

- VMMC is the latest development in HIV prevention.
- The science behind why VMMC works in reducing risk.
- What are the health benefits for women whose partners have been circumcised?
- Fact or fiction: Is sex better after VMMC?

Proposed activities

- Schedule meetings with editorial boards of at least two newspapers.
- Draft an op-ed on myths surrounding VMMC.
- Host a media tour that covers community dramas and other community mobilization for VMMC.
- Organize an annual prize for excellence in VMMC coverage for print journalists in Nyanza.

Staff, materials, budget, and partner support needed

- One program officer who works full time on VMMC will spend 10 percent of this time each month engaging the media.
- One member of the administrative staff will assist by sending out communication materials and making appointments to meet journalists.

A prerequisite to a successful effort to engage the media and increase the amount and type of coverage on VMMC is to have well-written handouts for journalists—informative and error-free promotional materials on VMMC issues and services available and the work of VMMC programs.

Websites play a part in these promotional efforts, since journalists are likely to use them when searching for information for a VMMC story. This means that VMMC program websites need to have up-to-date contact information; background information on programs; key points and information about VMMC, press releases, and information on upcoming events.

As efforts to engage the media intensify, media responsibilities within VMMC programs may need to be divided up, perhaps with the help of some colleagues. This will make the workload lighter and efforts to engage the media more strategic and effective.

Based on talent and interest, one person can be designated to write press releases, media advisories, and similar documents. Someone else can be designated as a spokesperson for the program. Ideally, the spokesperson should be the only one who speaks to journalists so they receive consistent and planned messages. The person chosen for this role needs to feel comfortable with public speaking and be able to communicate clearly and knowledgeably about VMMC with the media in terms they will understand.

Kenya Today

Male Circumcision Drive Scores Huge Success

28 Nov 2011, Nairobi

National AIDS and STD Control Programme (NASCOP) Executive Director says that out of 1 million men who had undergone the voluntary male circumcision in the region, 40 per cent were Kenyans, with the Ministry of Medical Services commending the programme for its huge success.

It is important to think carefully about how messages are framed and what is to be communicated before making contact with journalists about any VMMC issue. This also applies if a journalist calls to request information. If unprepared to answer questions, it is better to promise to call back after establishing a deadline.

Journalists need to have timely and accurate information. It is important to return the call before the deadline stated. A call back after the deadline or a failure to call may mean losing the trust of the media contact and missing a chance to get the story out.

Creating a Media List

A media list is an essential tool for identifying the key media contacts and journalists most likely to cover a VMMC story, including their mailing and email addresses and phone and fax numbers. This list can include editors, talk show hosts, and television and radio producers, all of whom may become allies if they receive robust and timely information from the program about its activities. Developing this list takes time, and it needs to be continuously updated.

Such a list helps VMMC programs know which journalists and which newspapers and TV and radio stations cover VMMC, HIV and AIDS, and health-related policies and issues, as well as what kind of coverage they usually provide—pro, con, or balanced. Programs with this information can “pitch” VMMC stories more effectively to the journalists most likely to welcome story ideas on VMMC, whether from a human-interest, policy, or science angle.

Media sign-in sheets at a program’s news events provide valuable additions to the media list. Program staff should also add contacts to the media list whenever a journalist or other media representative calls to ask a question.

An internet search can assist in building the media list, revealing the names of journalists who write about VMMC and other health and policy issues.

A call to a news editor or an assignment editor at a station or newspaper may also be helpful, since this person may be willing to state who covers a certain beat and make connections to the appropriate journalists.

When contact is made, it is a good idea to ask journalists how they prefer to receive information and whether they always read their email messages, then record their answers on the media list.

What is a beat reporter?

Beat reporters are journalists who do in-depth reporting on a particular issue or sector. They become very familiar with the topic and provide commentary and analysis in addition to the basics of a story. It is advantageous to cultivate beat reporters and develop good working relationships with them.

GETTING VMMC ON THE AGENDA OF EDITORIAL BOARDS

One of the best ways to increase media coverage for VMMC and get attention from local and national legislators is to convince editorial boards of important newspapers that VMMC is a vital HIV-prevention strategy and that VMMC programs provide reliable and newsworthy information on the topic.

It may be a good idea to request a meeting with an editorial board—a group of senior level editors and writers who determine what will be covered in the media outlet’s editorials and stories. While the main goal of the meeting is to influence future editorials and content by raising awareness about key VMMC issues, the meeting can serve other purposes. Program representatives will be able to gauge the media outlet’s level of interest in covering VMMC issues in order to be in a better position to craft messages and story angles that attract favorable attention and coverage.

If a managing editor or editorial-page editor is called to request this meeting, he or she is likely to ask what is to be discussed and why it is important. Responses to these questions should be brief and, if possible, a local concern or recent news event cited—perhaps a news report that a specific district has a high incidence of HIV and a very low rate of circumcision, compared to another district.

What are editorial boards?

Small groups of the senior staff of newspapers and radio and TV stations comprise editorial boards. They make decisions about the content of the stories, programs, and opinion pieces that will be published or aired.

When setting up the meeting, it is a good idea to ask if more than one person can come. If so, it may be helpful if a program brings two people who speak from different perspectives: for example, one who speaks authoritatively about the medical benefits of VMMC and another who provides the human context—perhaps by describing how a couple’s life changed after accessing VMMC services.

Before meeting with the editorial board, it is important to become familiar with the media outlet’s editorials and the type of coverage usually given to VMMC and other health issues. To prepare for the meeting, it is also a good idea to review the media plan, write down facts and points to be conveyed at the meeting, and brainstorm and critique ideas and local angles with program staff. In the process, it is important to ask and answer questions from a journalist’s point of view, including “Why should I cover this?”

If no media kit has been prepared for the meeting, appropriate promotional materials can serve as handouts. A draft of an op-ed article could also be provided (see page 16).

At the Board Meeting and After

Following the advice below may lead to a more productive meeting:

- Talk as persuasively and briefly as possible. Be prepared to have only between five to ten minutes to present the case.
- Be prepared to answer questions. If the answer to a question is not known, promise to find out and get back to the board.
- Leave behind a media kit and copies of printed materials that reinforce the points made.
- Send a thank-you note.
- Follow up, if a promised editorial or other article is not published. Offer the alternative of writing an op-ed or a letter to the editor.

HOSTING A MEDIA EVENT OR PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

Another way to engage the media is to host a media event. Journalists can be invited to come and see the program in action and conduct interviews with clients willing to talk about their VMMC experiences. They could be invited to a screening of a VMMC video and discussion with community members, or to cover a sermon that incorporates VMMC issues by a dynamic pastor who was inspired by the program. These kind of events allow journalists to capture a human angle and cover a story as it happens.

If a journalist will be present, community members and others should be advised beforehand. They may balk or drop out otherwise, and may be unwilling to answer personal discussion questions and make public sensitive information.

When planning a media event or a journalist's visit, it is important to ensure a media kit is ready and the designated media spokesperson is available to answer questions or be interviewed.

Invitations to an event should draw from the media list and request a response. Acceptances should be confirmed one day before.

If interviews are held during the event, it is wise to record them so any errors or misquotes can be corrected. Those involved in the interview must be told beforehand that it is being recorded.

WRITING A PRESS RELEASE AND MEDIA ADVISORY

A press release is a one- or two-page document that is sent to media outlets and news agencies or inserted in a press kit. It seeks to inform the media about a particular event, service, or product, and to convince journalists that the story is worth covering. But a press release is not an advertisement; its primary purpose is to deliver a newsworthy story.

All press releases should be written in the third person. They should not be more than two pages, double-spaced. The most important components are the headline and first paragraph. These need to express the press release's purpose and grab the attention of everyone who reads it. The most important information—the essentials of the story—is put right at the beginning. People who receive press releases are busy and bombarded with news; they cannot be counted on to continue reading if the headline and first paragraph are unexciting or too technical to understand.

Using quotes in the body of a press release is essential. These help bring the story to life or can underline the involvement and support of someone readers consider to be important. Permission to use the quote must be obtained beforehand from the person who made the statement. It is also crucial to make sure the quote captures exactly what was said.

No matter what story is highlighted, a press release should answer five questions or “the five Ws”: who? what? where? when? why? A more impressive story angle will result if two more questions are added: who cares? and so what?

Though a press release can help to raise the visibility of a program and mobilize clients to access or support VMMC services, this should not be its focus. Instead, a press release needs to convey a story a journalist can cover and demonstrate its newsworthiness.



Journalists can be invited to see a program in action.

Tips on Writing a Press Release

1. Select an appropriate angle for the story, based on the media plan. If possible, a press release story should reference current health and social issues as well as local personalities and events.
2. Open with a strong headline and opening paragraph to grab the reader's attention.
3. Try to illustrate the story and bring it to life for readers with real examples they can relate to or visualize.
4. Be concise. Do not bog down the release and the reader with unnecessary words.
5. Do not use medical clichés and jargon not understood by a general reader.
6. Check the release for spelling errors and ensure it is grammatically correct.
7. Stick to the facts and avoid embellishments.

Working with VMMC programs is challenging.... Staff in VMMC programs have a lot of information and knowledge about VMMC, while most journalists have limited information about the intervention. So when we attend VMMC media activities, we inadvertently fail to accurately report on some issues, leading to tensions especially when programs accuse journalists of inaccurate reporting. The issue is not about [a] deliberate decision on the part of [a] journalist to inaccurately report on VMMC, but a serious information asymmetry.

—Jackline, Journalist
Daily Nation, Nairobi

The advice above and the template provided on page 12 may assist in the task of composing an effective press release.

Often Included in Newsworthy Stories:

- *Conflict and controversy*: Involve well-known people or organizations to add to the news value.
- *Myths and old stories*: Explore the good vs. bad or rich vs. poor.
- *Problems and solutions*: Focus on a problem that is a major issue for a large number of people and describe a new way to address it.
- *Human interest*: Select stories about real people to whom others can relate.

Press Release Template

Organization's name and logo

The release should be on organizational letterhead, if possible. Otherwise, the name of the organization or program can run across the top of the release.

For immediate release

This states when the information in the release can be published or broadcast. The heading can be replaced by "Embargoed until (release date and/or time)." Most journalists will hold the information until that date, but do not count on this.

Contact information

The release should provide the name, phone and fax numbers, and email address of the person journalists can contact for more information.

Headline

The headline is a short phrase that sums up the essence of the release. This runs under the contact information and above the body of the release.

Dateline: city, province/district, country

Most news articles in newspapers begin with a dateline.

Body

- The first paragraph is called the lead. With the headline, it is the most powerful and important part of the release. The story's first sentence should provide the essential information and must capture the interest of readers.
- Who, what, where, when, and why must be covered—the supporting information.
- The use of quotes will put a human face on the news. Those used should substantiate the lead, be from a significant person, and add information. If possible, use a quote within the first few paragraphs.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short. Use plain language and no acronyms or jargon.
- If the release has more than one page, type "—more—" at the bottom of the first page to signal its continuation on the next page.

###

[The symbol ### or "END" marks the end of the release, centered on the bottom of the page.]

Writing and Sending Out a Media Advisory

A media advisory is a one-page announcement of an upcoming event sent to journalists a few days before in the hope they will cover it. A media advisory is shorter than a press release but answers the same five questions: who? what? when? where? why?

Media Advisory Template

For release on: Day and month

Contact information: Name of the spokesperson for the program, telephone number, and email address

Title: [sample] Health Minister Speaks on the Goal of Reaching More Than 1 Million with VMMC Services

Dateline: Kisumu, Nyanza Province

Body: [Includes the five Ws]

What: Name of organization or program, event details

Why: So what? Why should people care about this?

When: Date and time

Where: Location and brief directions, if needed

Who: Organizational details, including list of key speakers

Additional information: (optional)

Link to the website of the program or organization

(to indicate end)

Two or more days before the event, it is a good idea to call assignment desks of the media outlets targeted by the advisory to ask if it was received. If not, it can be sent again, perhaps to a different person, email address, or fax number. The next question to ask is whether a journalist was assigned to cover the event and, if so, if he or she needs more information or would like to schedule an interview with the spokesperson designated by the program.

The media outlets should be called again on the morning of the event to find out what time journalists will arrive and whether they know where to park. The call can also convey more details about the key activity, such as when an award ceremony or a keynote speaker is scheduled.

The following actions will make the task of covering the event as easy and pleasant as possible for the journalists:

- Ask ahead of time what each of the journalists need in the way of lighting, electrical outlets, and other equipment, and make sure everything is available.
- Let journalists know ahead of time where they can park their cars.
- Designate someone who will welcome journalists when they arrive and take them to the right location.
- Give each journalist who arrives a media package with the news release, information on VMMC, and, if possible, photos of key people, transcripts of speeches, and attendance information.
- Designate a media area where journalists can conduct interviews in pleasant surroundings, without background noise and interruptions.

HOLDING A NEWS CONFERENCE

News conferences should only be held if there is something newsworthy to announce, such as a new VMMC program, an important achievement, new statistics or research findings, or fresh information of importance to many people in the area.

To be seen as newsworthy and attract journalists, these kinds of announcements should be made by a high-ranking official in a Ministry of Health or a local or national celebrity.

Events of this kind may require an experienced master of ceremonies and a detailed program. If a panel of technical experts—no more than three or four—is included, a short biography of each should be available as a handout for journalists. The master

of ceremonies manages how these speakers use the time allotted to them as well as a question-and-answer session.

It is important to schedule news conferences early in the week—preferably on a Monday or Tuesday, when editorial boards are setting their stories and considering others that might be covered later that week. By the middle and end of the week, journalists have full agendas and are busy preparing weekend coverage.

The following questions should be answered before making a decision to hold a news conference:

- What information will be given out?
- What is the agenda and the best way to organize speakers or a panel?
- Are microphones, lighting, and other equipment needed?
- What refreshments will be served to attract journalists to the news conference?

What is an assignment desk?

This may not be a literal desk in a newsroom. It is where the responsibility resides for determining which story will be covered and who will cover it.

At least a week in advance of the news conference, invitations should be sent to the media and program guests. The media advisory is sent out three to five days before the news conference, and a press release is written for inclusion in the press kit to be given to journalists on the day of the news conference.

BEING INTERVIEWED BY BROADCAST MEDIA

Producers of radio and television talk shows on the lookout for story ideas are included in an up-to-date media list, and the media plan is used when making contact with them. When making contact, it is best to be prepared to talk about the program’s goals and experience relating to VMMC and why viewers/listeners should care about the topic. Broadcast media will also want to hear about an upcoming VMMC event or what is called a “news peg”—an element that makes the story timely—for example, the launch of new VMMC materials (such as the VMMC Communication Toolkit for use by community, business, and religious leaders).

If invited to a radio or TV interview, several important questions should be asked, including how long the interview will be, whether it will be live or taped, if there will be call-in questions, and who and how many other guests might be featured. It is a good idea to learn as much as possible about the host and the station by listening to or watching the

show and paying close attention to its format and the host’s interviewing style, including whether he or she expresses strong opinions.

It is also helpful to write down powerful anecdotes and personal stories that might be shared during the interview and anticipate questions that might

be asked. Answers and counter arguments should be formulated beforehand, including “worst possible questions.” Role playing these exchanges with colleagues is helpful. So is practicing short answers to questions asked—keeping them to eight or ten seconds.



Press releases need to grab the attention of busy journalists.

What to Do and Say When Interviewed

- Speak in a natural, audible tone, and stay on message. Remain calm at all times and do not get defensive.
- Present messages from the media plan as quickly and concisely as possible.
- Never use jargon and acronyms. Use language that will be easily understood by people who do not know much or anything about VMMC.
- Answer questions by stating the main message first, followed by supporting points outlined in the media plan. Use questions as springboards for developing the message.
- Don’t be afraid to correct erroneous statements made by an interviewer or another guest, but do so calmly.

WRITING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND OP-EDS

A letter to the editor generally comments on a specific news story, editorial, or a previous letter. Newspapers also publish letters that comment on timely issues or events that they neglected to cover.

Letters to the editor can be used to respond or add to media reports about VMMC and deliver important messages about VMMC programs. They can also be used to praise balanced and accurate coverage provided by a newspaper. A letter to the editor is better used to reinforce a positive, accurate story about VMMC and clarify a message or point of view, rather than serve as a vehicle of complaint about negative publicity.

TIP: Before writing a letter to the editor about VMMC, consider the overall purpose. Is it to:

- correct or clarify information or perceptions?
- provide additional information?
- express an opinion or point of view?
- introduce or reinforce a message?

An op-ed is an opinion piece written for newspapers and online publications. The term “op-ed” refers to its common placement opposite the editorial page. Op-eds may be written by specialists who offer an alternate position to those taken by editorials. The editors may oppose the viewpoint expressed in the op-ed but still want to present both sides.

A well-written opinion piece that presents a fresh viewpoint with crisp, logical reasoning has a good chance of being published and widely read. It could cause people to stop and think about VMMC, especially if reporting and editorializing has been one-sided. Op-eds can also be an image-building tool. They can help to brand the program or the author as an authority on VMMC issues.

Before beginning to write an op-ed, it is important to obtain the outlet’s guidelines on length (usually 700–800 words) and read its op-ed policies. These rules must be followed and the word count checked before submitting the article. At the end of the submission, a brief bio is provided, along with a phone number, email address, and a mailing address. This contact information is not usually published. The following guidance applies to op-eds as well as to letters to the editor:

- Focus on one VMMC topic or issue and state it clearly and concisely.

TIP: When writing an op-ed:

- Avoid criticizing others and point-by-point rebuttals of any previous op-ed on VMMC.
- Don’t be satisfied with merely pointing out a problem. Offer several recommendations or solutions, if possible.
- Adopt a local angle, even on a national issue, to increase reader interest.
- Clearly re-state the main point in the final paragraph and issue a call to action, if appropriate.

- Make the main point in the first paragraph. Try to begin with a statement that attracts attention to the topic and indicates why the reader should care about it.
- Use active verbs and direct, powerful language.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- Avoid jargon, clichés, and technical statements. Use simple words that are understood by an average reader.
- Keep the tone conversational. Avoid seeming pushy or overbearing and use humor, if appropriate.
- Back up statements with facts, such as first-hand information and research on VMMC.
- Have a colleague or an outsider review the draft.
- Proofread and check the word count.

RESPONDING TO MISINFORMATION AND NEGATIVE REPORTING

Inaccurate or misleading media reports about VMMC provide an opportunity for a rebuttal and increased coverage. Notwithstanding, it may be wise to ignore an insignificant error or omission as well as stories that are badly written or in a negative tone, if they are factually accurate. It is important to be as objective as possible about the coverage. Getting a second opinion from an outsider may help confirm whether a story is negative or unbalanced.

A response may be warranted if a story seriously misinforms or leaves false impressions about VMMC, but a letter to the editor could be counterproductive if it revives interest in a

distracting issue likely to die on its own. If errors and allegations are very serious, an appropriate response may be an op-ed. This could be authored by VMMC program staff or requested from a third party who is knowledgeable on VMMC about the topic.

TIP: Before writing a letter to the editor about VMMC, consider the overall purpose. Is it to:

- correct or clarify information or perceptions?
- provide additional information?
- express an opinion or point of view?
- introduce or reinforce a message?

Even if a story on VMMC has an unfair, derisive, and negative tone, any letter or op-ed countering it needs to be unemotional. If a media outlet or

journalist presents consistently poor or biased coverage on VMMC, the best course may be to communicate with the editor-in-chief or station manager. Another alternative is to ask representatives of VMMC task forces to request a meeting with the editorial board.

Journalists who convey factual errors about VMMC could be telephoned or emailed with polite corrections,

followed by a package of VMMC materials. Usually, a journalist will promise not to repeat the error. A published correction can be requested if the error is significant. If journalists who make errors do not respond appropriately to this contact, a call to the editor may be warranted, followed up by a personal letter or a letter for publication that corrects the mistake.

VMMC program managers and other staff need to take advantage of opportunities to correct and educate journalists on VMMC, rebutting myths associated with male circumcision, and demonstrating that VMMC is a compelling news topic that can be addressed with wit.

Before responding to negative and misinformed reporting, it may help to answer the following questions:

What is the media outlet's track record on covering VMMC and public health issues?

- Does the media outlet consistently take one side in their editorials and news coverage or does it run stories with differing points of view?
- Can the errors or omissions be corrected in a letter to the editor? Does the media outlet acknowledge its errors and make an effort to correct them?

ASSESSING THE EFFORT TO ENGAGE THE MEDIA

Efforts to engage the media and improve coverage of VMMC need to be assessed and followed up. Answering the following questions is a good way to start:

- *Did the media coverage of VMMC increase?* How many stories were written about

The People

270,000 Take Part in Voluntary Male Circumcision

22 Nov 2011, Nairobi

Nyanza provincial task force on male circumcision reveals that more than 270,000 men have been circumcised in Nyanza province since November 2008. According to Nyanza director of public health and sanitation Nyanza has led the way in conducting a clinical trial of male circumcision.

VMMC? How many of these stories were written by journalists on the media list? Is this list being continually updated?

- *Were the main messages and points in the media plan accurately portrayed?* Did the news coverage reflect the contents of the media plan? Were messages and points understood? Or were they misunderstood and the focus lost?
- *What lessons were learned?* What should be done differently? What went well and what did not go well? Was the question “who cares” answered?
- *Were lessons shared?* Were successes in engaging the media shared with VMMC colleagues? Were opportunities for future collaboration explored?

A number of staff working in VMMC programs have poor media relation skills. They are not open with the media, and some see the media as a threat to their programs.... The media should support [the] VMMC campaign in the country.... This antagonistic relationship can be improved through joint training [of] VMMC staff and media staff and developing a user-friendly media engagement guide for them.

—Agwanda, Journalist,
Radio Lake Victoria FM, Kisumu

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ANNEX : BACKGROUND TO VMMC IN KENYA

After the formation of the National MC Task Force in 2007, a national meeting was convened later that year to develop a roll-out strategy for VMMC services. Nyanza Province was identified as the priority region and the Luo as the priority ethnic group for these services. These decisions acknowledged Nyanza's high HIV prevalence—13.9 percent among adults ages 15-49—and its low rate of male circumcision: 48.3 percent. Among Kenyan men overall, the reported circumcision rate in 2007 was 85 percent, while among the Luo, the majority ethnic group in Nyanza, the rate of male circumcision was estimated to be 17 percent. Luo men have been ridiculed by other ethnic groups for whom male circumcision is a rite of passage into adulthood and a traditional cultural practice.

VMMC and the rollout of services became highly political issues during the run up to national elections in late 2007, when the Honorable Raila Odinga, a Luo from Nyanza, ran for president. The Luo Council of Elders perceived the simultaneous roll out of the VMMC program to be a political strategy aimed at undermining his candidacy and an attack on Luo cultural values. During the post-election period of heightened political and ethnic tension, the press carried stories of forced circumcisions of Luo men in Nairobi.

The Government of Kenya responded by making concerted efforts at national and local levels to engage the Luo Council of Elders and communities in advocacy and support for VMMC. In 2009, the National MC Task Force began a strategic partnership with a foundation named after Prime Minister Raile Odinga's father. The Task Force also appealed to Prime Minister Odinga, a Luo, to support VMMC publicly as a medical intervention and help convince the Luo Council of Elders to embrace it. As a result of these and other efforts by the national government, several Luo Members of Parliament and over 200 stakeholders expressed support for the rollout. Tensions decreased, but strategic demand creation for VMMC was still lacking.

The overall goal of the National MC Communication Strategy is to raise awareness of VMMC as a medical method that reduces the risk of heterosexual acquisition of HIV infection for men and create and maintain demand for VMMC services. The strategy identified barriers to uptake of VMMC services, including fear of pain and cultural resistance among traditionally non-circumcising communities. The strategy also sought to counter the growing perception that circumcised men and their sexual partners are fully protected from HIV, as well as disinhibitions deriving from this mistaken belief.



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