



HIV/AIDS in the Barbados workplace – one company’s dilemma

On 20 June 2004, George Hope, the General Manager of Caron Foods, a major manufacturing company in Barbados, faced the challenge of having to deal with the death of one of his employees - Maxine Cave - who had died of AIDS. Maxine was a production worker in the food plant and had been with the company for five years. She was a dedicated employee who had a positive work attitude. She rarely missed a day from work, was always on time, and got along well with her fellow employees. In fact, it was rumoured that she had had intimate relationships with at least seven men in the Production Department.

George Hope was informed about the cause of death by a fellow employee in the Production Department who lived in Maxine’s neighbourhood. He, along with other staff, had heard rumours and had noticed that she had become quite thin. Even though she had been absent from work for long periods during the past year, they had never imagined the seriousness of the illness – which she had chosen not to disclose to anyone in the organisation. Rather than face the stigma and discrimination associated with this illness, she had chosen to resign.

In the absence of any policy or procedure, George Hope now had to determine how he was going to deal with the rumours and innuendo surrounding the AIDS death of one of his employees, as well as the impact that this news could have on his other employees and on the sustainability of his organisation. “My management training never prepared me for dealing with fear and death in the organisation,” he mused.

This case was written by Sue Lynch with supervision from Dr Richard Norman from Victoria University of Wellington at the Caribbean Case Course in Barbados, July 2004. It has been prepared as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The names of the company and of the individuals concerned have been changed to protect the privacy of all.

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HIV/AIDS in Barbados

Barbados is the most easterly in the chain of islands in the Caribbean, and is washed by the Atlantic Ocean on its eastern side and by the Caribbean Sea on the west. The island depends heavily on tourism, which is its main industry, with sugar, offshore financial services and manufacturing as the other supporting industries. In 2002, the total population of Barbados was 269,000 persons.

The first AIDS case in Barbados was reported in 1984. From then to the end of September 2002, cumulatively, 2,575 HIV cases and 1,531 AIDS cases were reported to the National Surveillance Unit, with a fatality rate of 76 percent. During 2001, there were 212 new HIV cases reported (77 per 100,000 people) as well as 117 AIDS cases (43 per 100,000 population) and 95 AIDS deaths. It is estimated that 1.75 percent of the Barbados population is living with HIV/AIDS, and that the majority (75 percent) of HIV infections are transmitted through sexual relations between men and women.¹

Despite these figures, and the uncontrollable spread of this deadly disease, corporate Barbados' response has been "lukewarm" at best.

Few companies have HIV/AIDS policies in place, and even where they exist, dealing with the epidemic has not gone much further than that. Trade unions have been somewhat silent on the issue of HIV/AIDS as well, although they have initiated some awareness seminars. The education of employees in the public and private sectors has been left primarily to individual companies or ministries to initiate.

The public sector has taken the lead with educational programmes developed by the National HIV/AIDS Commission² and the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO).

In contrast to the public sector activities, the private sector has been slow to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, with little uptake of available materials or education programmes. The Barbados Employers' Confederation has prepared a booklet *Dealing with AIDS in the Workplace* which provides guidelines for preparing an HIV/AIDS policy and managing cases.³ A private sector AIDS Foundation was established in 2001, based on the Brazilian model whereby companies contribute a percentage of their profits - which is tax deductible - to a fund which is then used to support HIV/AIDS education and treatment programmes.

But most managers have not yet had to deal with the consequences of this disease in their organisations and few companies would know how to respond if they were faced with this situation.

Caron Foods was typical in that it did not have any policy or guidelines on dealing with HIV/AIDS in the workplace, even though, as a food plant, there could be significant costs to the company's reputation if it became known that an employee had the disease.

¹ Caribbean Epidemiological Centre (CAREC), *Sources and Trends Analysis of the Caribbean HIV/AIDS Epidemic 1982 – 2002*, Barbados

² The National HIV/AIDS Commission, Barbados (Brochure)

³ *HIV/AIDS and the Workplace*, Texas Department of Health Information leaflet.

Caron Foods

Caron Foods Inc was a public company with 350 shareholders. It was one of the oldest commercial food production companies in Barbados and was committed to the manufacture of quality products, a highly trained and efficient workforce and to quality service. Initially, the company was producing two indigenous food products. But, since the 1970s, it had become an export manufacturing company, producing ten different high quality products.

With subsidiaries in Guyana and Bermuda, Caron Foods had in the past five years increased its revenue with a 45 percent increase in export sales. Forty-five percent of Caron Foods' products were exported regionally while the remaining 55 percent were produced for the local market. The company had started with a staff of 20 and now had a complement of 150 employees. A regional team of Operations, Logistics and Purchasing Managers, based in Guyana, oversaw the local operations team. They visited the Barbados plant at least three times per year and were available for consultation or if "trouble-shooting" was needed.

At the Barbados plant, Operations Manager Robert Thomas was responsible for production, maintenance and quality. There were several areas within the Operations Department – Raw Materials, Production, Maintenance, Quality and Purchasing. Robert Thomas had three Supervisors reporting directly to him – two assigned to Production and one to Maintenance.

Forty-two of the plant's employees worked in Production. They ranged in age from 24 to 63, with the average age around 32.

In the Production Department the product was cut, processed, cooled and wrapped prior to packing and storage in the warehouse. At least 12 employees were required per shift on each production line, with two production lines in operation daily. The plant was semi-automated, modern and efficient, and the company put a high premium on hygiene. Employees were required to perform quality checks on at least two stations on the line and were also required to pack boxes at the end of the line and lift them onto a pallet to be taken to the warehouse for storage.

The social relationships in the plant

Caron Foods' Operations Manager, Robert Thomas, referred to the staff as "homegrown".

There was a time when at least one-third of the employees in the Production Department were related, and that had created some problems for its management. This was a result of past recruitment practices, whereby an employee would bring his/her son, daughter, cousin or niece for a job in the plant. This had created a varying set of family connections in the plant – which still existed, although to a lesser extent.

The recruitment policy was based "not so much on what you knew, but on who you knew," the General Manager, George Hope, confessed. He also said, "some of these relationships only come to the fore when there is a disciplinary situation and supervisors begin to take sides based not on the issues at hand, but on family connections."

Caron Foods therefore was very much like a family. Employees worked, socialised and played sports together. George Hope said: "It is a real family atmosphere here. One person

will raise a concern on behalf of another; and there may also be quite a few intimate relationships going on in the plant.”

The employee – Maxine Cave

Maxine Cave was a dedicated employee who had a positive work attitude. She started with the company first as a casual employee. Her performance had been so exceptional that, when a vacancy occurred in the Production Department five years ago, she was offered a permanent position on the production line.

Maxine flirted with the men in the department, and, according to George Hope, “though not very attractive to look at, she had a great personality”. There were rumours in the plant that she had been intimate with at least seven of the men there.

During the year prior to her death, Maxine Cave was constantly absent from work. She was away at least one day in every week. First, her doctor gave her a week’s sick leave, then two weeks’ sick leave at a time. Her illness was becoming a cause for concern for the Operations Manager, Robert Thomas, as well as for her supervisor. Not only was it causing some disruption on the production line, but her co-workers were beginning to resent the fact that they had to “take up the slack” while she was off sick. The Production Department also began to experience lower levels of productivity as a result of the low morale among the staff because of what they perceived to be the extra burden of work.

There was also speculation in the plant that Maxine may have AIDS, as there had been rumours that her ex-boyfriend had died of AIDS. Staff began to shun her. Because they behaved like a family, they would all share food at lunch time. They stopped sharing food with Maxine and, of course, would not accept any from her. They even stopped using any utensils that they believed that she may have used. “The staff were afraid,” George Hope said.

Meanwhile, Maxine was suffering in silence. She was feeling quite despondent. She knew she could no longer face her work colleagues - the stares, whispering, rejection and discrimination that she was dealing with. She could not imagine what the reaction would be if she had confirmed to her work colleagues that she did have AIDS. She was concerned about her appearance as she had lost at least 40 pounds within two months, a change which was becoming very noticeable. She was also concerned about her ability to perform her job, which necessitated a lot of standing and she knew that her Supervisor, who was very committed to the organisation and whose primary interest was attaining his daily production target, was unlikely to be very sympathetic to her if she was not feeling well at work.

Furthermore, she was worried that her husband and her eight-year-old daughter might be infected as well. Maxine had married since joining Caron Foods. Apparently, once she discovered that she was HIV positive, she had started attending church where she met “a nice young man”. They were married at least one year prior to her death.

Unable to cope with all these worries, Maxine made the decision to resign from the company in April 2004.

The company's response

Once they heard the rumours about Maxine Cave, while she was still working on the production line, the company had invited a registered nurse to speak to all of the staff about HIV/AIDS. The management realised that fear of HIV/AIDS could run rampant, and had the capacity to paralyse the organisation, because it was so different from other illnesses, and because it was both deadly and transmissible – primarily through sexual contact.

The nurse spoke to staff about HIV/AIDS – what it was, how it could and could not be transmitted, ways to reduce the risk of infection and things you should know if you were working with someone who might be infected with the disease.

All of the staff attended, including Maxine and as George Hope said, “at the end of the meeting with the nurse, Maxine was seen talking to her in private.”

The impact of Maxine's death

Maxine Cave died within two months of her resignation.

George Hope – normally a sensitive and caring man - admitted that if Maxine Cave had chosen not to resign and had returned to work, he would have faced a difficult dilemma. He would have had to make a choice between his company's viability, and the future employment of one of his employees.

He acknowledged that the company had no policy or guidelines on dealing with HIV/AIDS in the workplace. Because it was a food plant, he said that he would have been “inclined to pay the employee an amount equivalent to severance payment and allow her to go home before the public became aware that Caron Foods had an employee with AIDS.”

Once word got out that Maxine had indeed died of AIDS, staff became even more afraid because they had worked closely with her and, as some claimed: “I sat in the same chair that she sat in.”

Conclusion

George Hope still had much more to do before Caron Foods could recover from this death. The cost to the company could have been more significant if the public had become aware that an employee working in the food plant had died of AIDS. However, the costs to the company did include the cost of absenteeism, lost skills, having to train and re-train staff, recruitment of a new employee, reduced work performance and lower productivity of current staff as they faced the illness and death of a co-worker.