

An innovative South African series of 'talking books' is educating illiterate people on suicide, TB and substance abuse

Walking the talk

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Clinics in rural areas often have hundreds of pamphlets on health issues, but very few of these well-intended leaflets reach their target audience. About 30% of South African adults are functionally illiterate and this figure is often higher in rural communities where many pamphlets end up as fuel for the household fire.

But a home-grown invention, the "talking book", is making strides in communicating important messages to illiterate communities.

The book is the brainchild of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag), a rural health advocacy organisation.

Sadag, which has been educating rural communities on mental health since 1995, often saw their messages

literally go up in smoke.

High illiteracy rates made reaching and holding the interest of these communities a huge challenge, says Zane Wilson, chief executive of Sadag. She says Sadag volunteers had to invest lots of time and resources in making presentations to communities as they could not rely on the written word getting through.

"This was a difficult and expensive task," says Wilson. "And once we had left there was no back-up where the community could have their questions answered." Wilson started thinking about alternative ways to spread these messages and came up with the idea of talking books.

She thought about children's books in which pressing a button corresponding to a picture of a farm animal produces the sound that animal



High-school children in the Witkoppen area north of Johannesburg inspect their new books

makes and combined this with what she knew about community radio.

"We knew that radio was a powerful medium in rural areas," says Wilson, and so she devised the idea of a book in which the text would be narrated by sound bites for each page. Sadag briefed electrical and mechanical engineers to design an electronic soundboard with 16 buttons, each representing a page of text in the 16-page book, with a 30-second recording for each page.

Each page is supported by colourful illustrations and straightforward text. Celebrities' voices were used to narrate the text and were chosen because they are familiar to the communities and carry a certain amount of authority.

Lillian Dube, best known for her role as a nurse in *Soul City*, narrated the

book dealing with teen suicide, while *Generations* actress Rosie Motene voiced a book on Aids and depression.

Sadag says the books, also known as Iincwadi Zethemba or Books of Hope, have attracted much interest among the communities in which they have been distributed. "They intrigue people, because it is a fun, interactive way to get the message across," Wilson says. Users are encouraged to share and pass on the books to friends and family members.

The upsurge of teen suicides which has rocked the Northern Province prompted Sadag to launch its teen suicide prevention programme, *Suicide Shouldn't Be a Secret*. Because the illiteracy rate in the Northern Cape is as high as 40%, a talking book on the subject was a logical choice to kick-start the campaign.



The teen suicide book was recently part of a pilot project at two high schools in the Witkoppen area north of Johannesburg. Research shows that when information is presented in both visual and audio form, the retention rate increases by up to 50%. Children at the schools were fascinated by the books and seem to have absorbed the messages they contain. "I am so happy because now I know how to help my friend if he is not happy," said one pupil, while another commented, "I'm going to show this book to all my friends and family, and I'm going to teach them."

While Sadag focuses on mental health, the talking books are tackling a range of other development issues. Other titles in the series deal with TB, malaria, HIV/Aids medication and substance abuse.