
What our Readers Think: Our Readership Survey

Towards the end of last year, the *Critical Health* editorial collective agreed to embark on a readership survey. There were a number of factors which contributed to this decision. The prospect of meaningful changes in the health and welfare sectors in the years ahead led to an upsurge of debate amongst progressive health and welfare workers. The journal was thus faced with exciting new challenges. Over the years, our readership has grown, but we recognised that we did not know very much about our readers. We agreed on the need to involve our readers in planning an appropriate way forward.

We, therefore, inserted a questionnaire in edition no. 36/37 to find out what you, the readers, think about *Critical Health*. We wanted to hear your suggestions for improving the journal.

We are glad to say that we received an exceptionally good response. A large number of readers answered the questionnaire. It was very encouraging to see that an overwhelming majority of those who responded are very happy with the journal. Respondents also made a lot of constructive suggestions.

Who Reads *Critical Health*?

Critical Health is based in Johannesburg and it is therefore exciting to see that we have enthusiastic readers in all parts of South Africa. Most responses to the questionnaire came from the Western Cape, closely followed by the PWV (Pretoria, Witwatersrand, Vereeniging) region. We also received replies from Natal, the Eastern Cape and Border, the Northern Transvaal, the Eastern Transvaal and the Orange Free State and Northern Cape. There were a few responses from outside South Africa too.

A very high proportion of our subscribers completed the questionnaire. On average, the ratio was one out of three. Half of all subscribers in the Western Cape responded.

Most readers are between 25 and 50 years, but the journal is also read by younger and older people. We have an almost equal number of male and female readers. 55% of our readers have some form of employment, 13% are studying and a very high percentage, 37%, are both working and studying.

Many Highly Educated Readers

The vast majority of our readers have reached high levels of education. 67% have university degrees. Most also have reasonably high incomes. Almost all earn over R1 500 and almost half have incomes above R2 500. Of those readers who are studying, slightly more than half already have university degrees. In one respect, it is very positive that our readership is highly qualified. It suggests that the level of debate in the journal is of a high standard.

In another sense, it is a bit disappointing. The issues debated in *Critical Health* affect all health and welfare workers and, more broadly, all South Africans. We have been unable to come to a clear understanding as to why the journal is not that popular amongst people with lower qualifications. In the questionnaire, we asked respondents what they think of the level of English. The general response was that the material is accessible and this was echoed by those respondents with fewer educational qualifications and in lower income groups. We clearly need



First editions (circa 1980): produced by medical students, typewritten and had brown paper covers.

to broaden our readership in this regard, but it is not going to be an easy task.

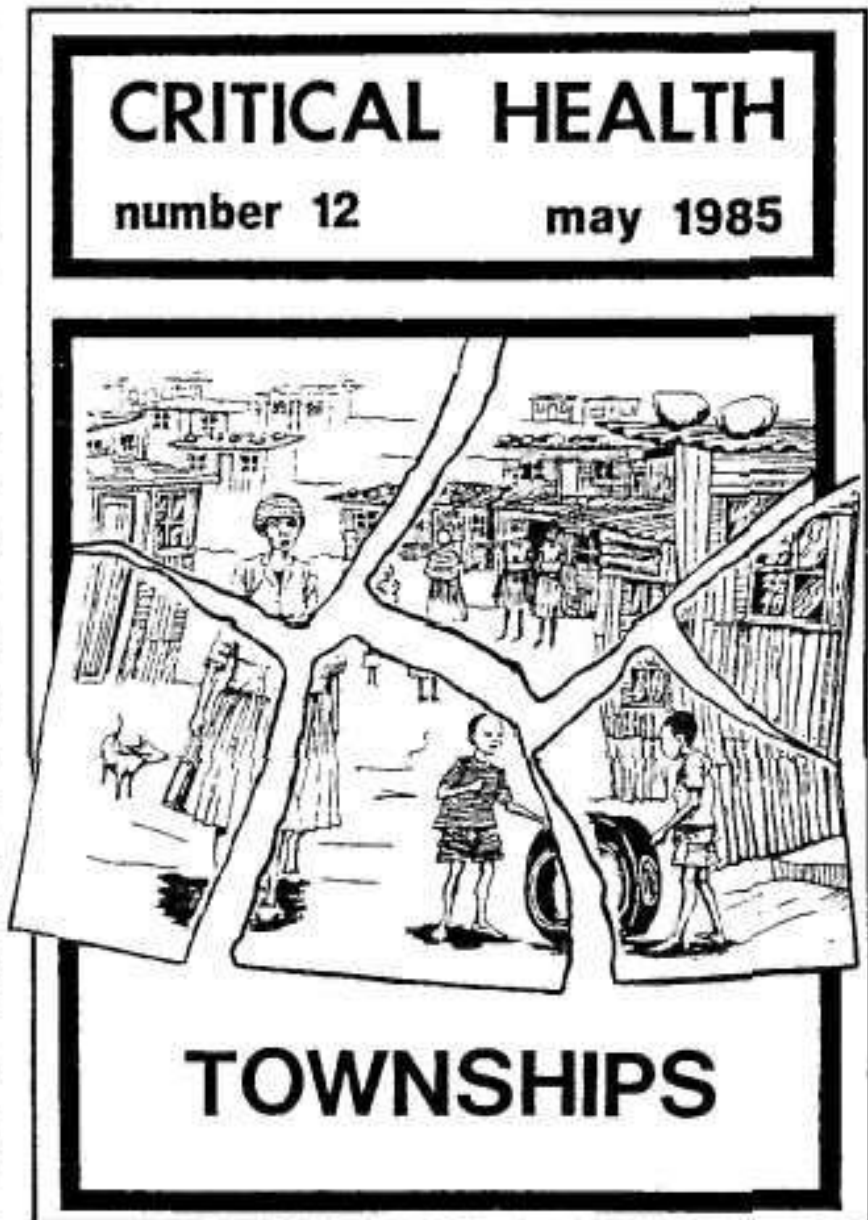
Most of our readers are from the health sector and there are quite a few who are not working or studying in either the health or welfare sectors. There are, however, only a few readers from the welfare sector. We asked

if *Critical Health* should cover both health and welfare issues and more than 90% of respondents said that we should. We, therefore, need to do a lot of work to increase the number of readers in the welfare sector.

Different Studies, Occupations and Interests

Our readers are studying for a broad range of health and welfare related degrees. It is interesting to note that a significant number of our readers with a health background are broadening their horizons and studying a wide variety of arts subjects.

It is also exiting that the journal is appealing to various people with very different jobs. There are general practitioners in urban and rural areas, specialists, nurses, dentists, social workers and occupational therapists. A surprisingly large number of readers are involved in small health projects, occupational and environmental health and health management. Many of our readers are doing educational work, both within and outside the health and welfare sectors.



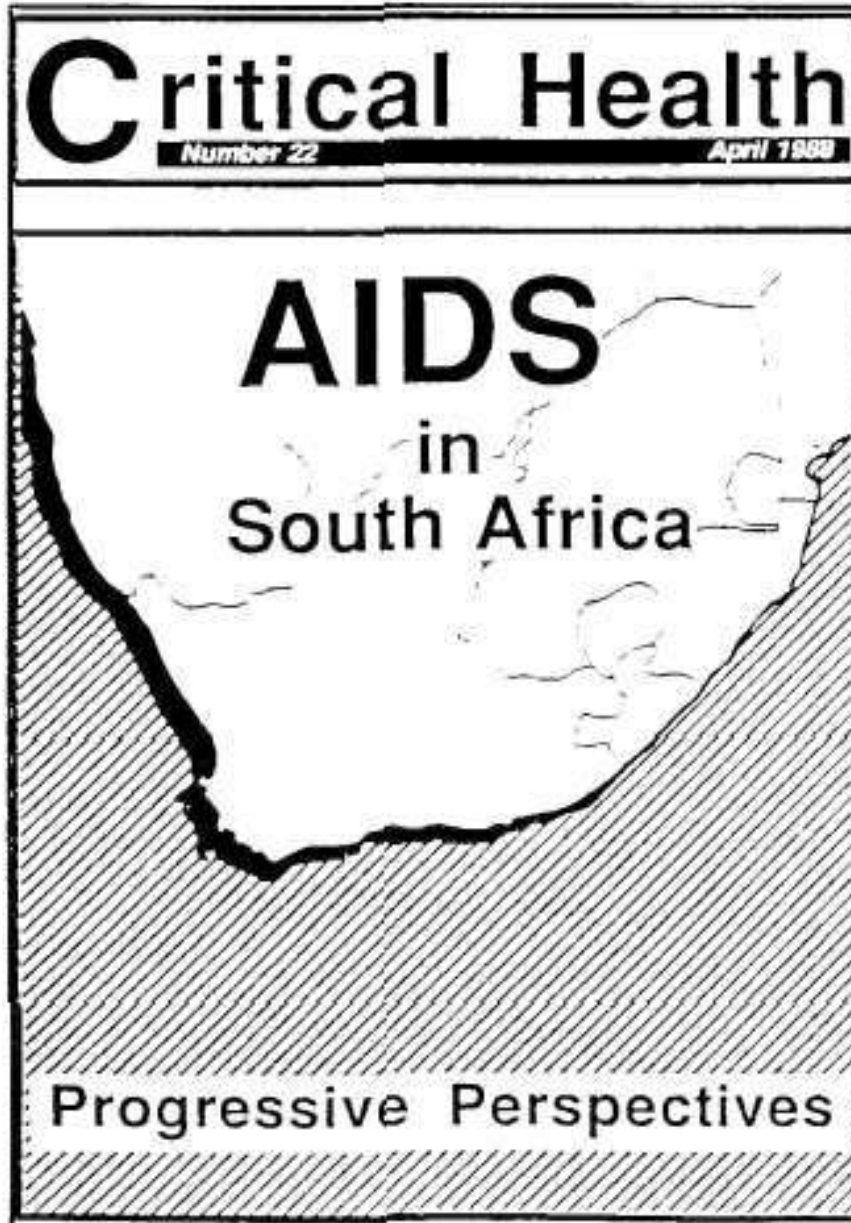
1985: an editorial collective now gets material from different sources and distribution is increasing.

The ANC, Other Parties, Health Organisations

In terms of political allegiance, a slight majority of our readers are ANC supporters. We also have readers from across the political spectrum, including supporters of the DP, NP, SACP and Azapo. Some would vote for a Green Party or a Feminist Party. Almost all our readers belong to one or more organisations and well over half belong to a health organisation.

Other organisations include political parties, church structures, civics and community organisations, trade unions and women's organisations.

The survey clearly indicates that *Critical Health* is read by a wide cross section of people. This finding was backed up by a respondent who used to work in a resource centre. According to her, the journal was read by professionals, social and health workers and students.



1988: now employing full-time staff. This particular edition now sold out. We recognise serious issues and provide a forum for information and discussion.

Thorough Reading, Sharing

On the whole, respondents read the journal thoroughly. More than half read every issue. Roughly half read most articles and a further quarter read at least a few articles per issue.

It is encouraging to see that readers share their copies of the journal. Of those who have their own copies, 70% do so with at least one other person. A large number of readers share their copies with 3 or more people. It may well be the case that some of these readers are involved in education and use the journal for educational purposes.

We seem to have an even spread of new and long standing readers. This indicates that the journal does have a certain attraction to potential readers and that it also retains its appeal in the longer term.

Good Political Content, Debate and Educational Value

We asked readers what they liked about the journal and what they disliked. It was encouraging to see that positive responses overwhelmingly outnumbered those that were unfavourable. The majority of readers answered that



1991: Upsurge in level of debate in the health sector. Editions getting thicker.

they like the political content, level of debate and educational value of the journal.

We asked whether it was more important for us to provide basic educational material or to reflect and critique topical debates. Most respondents said both are equally important, but there was a slight bias towards the second option. We will therefore continue to strive to present new debates in a manner which will be accessible to those who have little prior knowledge of the issues concerned.

Single Themes and Many Topics

In terms of dislikes, the only points mentioned reasonably frequently were that *Critical Health* fails to cover certain health and welfare issues. We asked readers to tell us what aspects they would like us to cover and it was clearly evident that there is a demand for a very wide range of topics. On the other hand, there was a positive response to the fact that *Critical Health* devotes each issue to a different theme.

Given that we only publish 4 editions a year, there is clearly a tension between dedicating each edition to a specific theme and covering the range of topics which are of interest to our readers. We have tried to resolve this by retaining thematic editions and adding a general or topical issues section in each edition. This will allow us to continue to present a broad range of issues on particular themes. It will also enable us to both cover a wider range of topics and reflect new issues and debates as they arise.

What do our Readers Want?

In terms of the topics that readers want us to cover, primary health care, health personnel debates and community participation were top of the list. We are devoting this and the next edition to health personnel. The articles by Binedell and Miller and Concha in this edition deal with community workers. We hope to raise debate on how health structures should be accountable to communities in the next edition. The training of health personnel was also a popular issue and we will be carrying a number of articles on this issue in the next edition. A number of respondents were interested in further material on Aids and we hope to bring out an issue devoted to Aids next year.

There was a strong call for more coverage on progressive health and welfare organisations, health services in other countries and the crisis in the private and public health sectors. We are trying to deal with these issues on a more regular basis. See, for example, the articles on Sahssso and the health budget in this edition.

There was also popular support for topics dealt with in recent editions, including health in the cities, women and health, workers and health, a national health service and developments in welfare.

A large number of respondents indicated that they want more material on health in rural areas. *Critical Health* has been reasonably weak in this regard and we, therefore, request readers in rural areas to inform us of issues which need to be covered and to forward articles for possible publication.

Replies to Articles, Lively Debate

A majority of respondents want the journal to carry replies to articles in previous editions. We have made significant advances in this regard. This edition alone carries six responses to other articles. We hope that these responses, in turn, lead to further debate. We want to encourage all our readers to contribute in this regard. There was a demand for a resource section and in our next edition we will be providing a bibliography on health personnel.



We asked our readers whether *Critical Health* should become the official journal of Sahssor or whether it should retain its independent voice. More than 80% were in favour of continued independence. The editorial collective of the journal had to make a decision in this regard at the beginning of this year and we agreed to remain independent for the immediate future. The position we adopted is clearly in keeping with the feelings of most of our readers.

Appearance and Style

In general, people were happy with the layout of the journal. Our longer term readers agreed that the style of the more recent editions has improved. Most respondents thought that there are just about the right number of pictures and diagrams in the journal, but there was a sizeable minority who felt that there were too few. We are working towards improving the quality and appropriateness of the photos and graphics which accompany the articles.

Distribution can Improve

On the whole, respondents with a wide range of backgrounds and occupations expressed an exceptionally positive attitude to *Critical Health*. This, in turn, helped us to recognise our major weakness. A good journal with wide appeal should have a big distribution, but we are clearly still only distributing the journal to a small percentage of our potential readership.

A number of readers actually raised problems in this regard. These include receiving copies late and not finding *Critical Health* in bookshops. We are already placing more emphasis on distribution. We hope to iron out all the specific problems and increase our readership by a significant number. We also ask our readers to encourage friends, fellow students and workers to read and subscribe to the journal.

This article is merely a brief overview of the main findings of the survey. There are many suggestions made by respondents which have not been addressed here, but we are definitely taking them into account. We, furthermore, welcome any further criticisms and suggestions.

Thanks to all those who responded to the questionnaire! We also encourage all our readers to continue to play a part in making the journal into the journal you want!