

Health communication: a call for papers

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Many – some would argue all – successful public health initiatives would not be possible without strategic communications. Paradoxically, the discipline remains misunderstood, underfunded and underutilized. Communication is too often neglected and only incorporated into public health programmes as an afterthought. That is why for the first time the *Bulletin* is devoting a theme issue to the dynamic field of public health communication. The theme issue, scheduled for August 2009, is seeking diverse contributions, including research on work related to developing countries that increases knowledge on the subject and catalyses more such research in the future. It also invites studies of new and effective ways of evaluating the impact of public health communications – one of its most illusive but compelling aspects.

Expanding the existing evidence base, the theme issue will seek to underscore a conviction among professional communicators that communication is a public health intervention in its own right and not merely a supporting role.

The theme issue will explore five key areas of public health communication. The first is the challenging question of how to reach the “unreached”. These may be the communities that cannot be reached physically, due to geographical isolation, insecurity or other obstacles. They may lack access to common communication outlets, such as radio, newspapers or the internet, or they may speak a different language.

The second area is the financial and human cost of poor communication, examining public health failures and seeking lessons from successful “anti-public health” campaigns, such as those run by the tobacco industry.

Communication in extreme situations – major health crises, humanitarian disasters or epidemics – will be the third major area of the *Bulletin* theme issue. The fourth will be the

contrasting roles of new and traditional technology in reaching public health communication goals, such as mobile-phone text messages and radio broadcasting.

Finally, the *Bulletin* theme issue will highlight monitoring and evaluation of the impact of public health communication. This area is often neglected or done on an ad hoc basis, but it is critical particularly when investment needs to be justified. Evaluation also allows us to learn from past mistakes or successes.

Communication is at the heart of public health. Practitioners understand intuitively the role that the exchange of information plays in achieving results in public health – when doctors interpret a patient’s symptoms, when public health authorities give timely advice to a community at risk or when researchers exchange data as they grapple with the complexities of a disease. Too often we lack the evidence that would allow public health communicators to maximize the efficacy of such interchanges. We lack cost–benefit data that could be used to make a case for investing in strategic communication in some of the world’s most vulnerable communities.

This theme issue seeks to increase this evidence base and raise awareness among public health managers about the importance of communication in public health. It seeks to break new ground by throwing light on a core but neglected specialization of public health.

In extreme situations, communication assumes a critical role in protecting people’s health around the world. In outbreaks and epidemics, successful communication of risk and the mitigating actions that can be taken is often the most crucial element of effective outbreak management.¹ During humanitarian crises, effective communication highlights urgent life-saving interventions and plays a critical

role in mobilizing resources for health response. But public health crises are littered with communication failures – often we do not have information management and dissemination systems that can withstand the stress of an emergency.

Like public health itself, communication must be seen in the context of a rapidly evolving landscape. Globalization has led to an increased appetite for information of all kinds. People seek health information through outlets not even conceived 10 years ago. For example, the mobile phone market is growing globally, with Africa experiencing more than 350% growth between 2002 and 2005.² These changes provide an opportunity to reach many for the first time. Furthermore, newer satellite and web technologies allow the public to influence public health messaging through electronic means. Upheavals in the world economy and political climate affect the composition of target audiences and the content of messages.

The successes in public health communication are well-documented. From disseminating basic public health messages (such as the benefits of hand washing in preventing diarrhoea) to raising awareness and advocacy to stop people from smoking and encouraging them to lead a healthy lifestyle, communication is not a supporting actor but takes a leading role: it is *the* primary public health intervention that cuts across all others. Even in countries with a weak infrastructure and limited resources, strategic communication is not only possible but essential. Without it, other interventions may waste precious time and money, and reap little or no result.

Manuscripts on any of the above topics should be submitted to: <http://submit.bwho.org> by 1 November 2008. ■

References

Available at: <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/7/08-055566/en/index.html>

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