

Health Communication in the Caribbean

The broad dissemination of health information—with the aim of increasing knowledge, improving attitudes, and changing behavior—is a crucial element in today's primary health-care delivery systems. The mass communication media and other communication methods can have a significant impact on health standards by disseminating information to the general public. This is especially true in the poorest countries, where national budgets are inadequate to provide resources to sustain such vital human services as education, health, and social security.

Cooperative working relationships between the health and communication sectors in Caribbean countries have developed during the past two decades and have undoubtedly been an important factor in the improvement of health standards in the subregion. However, there is a critical need to deepen these relationships in view of current health concerns. Toward this end, a Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Communications and Integration Seminar for Community Journalists was held in November 1986. It was followed in November 1987 by the First Caribbean Health-Communication Round Table, held in Barbados. Organized and initiated by the Pan American Health Organization and cosponsored by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) and CARICOM, the round table brought together 70 health and communication professionals representing the governments of the English-speaking Caribbean, the private sector, and subregional and international agencies. It provided an opportunity to consolidate the gains made in recent years and to strengthen the positive trend in cooperation between health and media personnel.

It is particularly appropriate to review these initiatives in the Caribbean in light of the World Health Organization's focus on health communication in this year's World Health Day. Similar conferences, sponsored by the World Health Organization with support from UNESCO and other institutions, have been held in Asia and Africa.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROUND TABLE

The overall purposes of the round table were to mobilize the communication media as a force for health in the Caribbean and to improve health-communication standards through intersectoral cooperation. Specific objectives were (1) to provide the media with information on priority public health issues, namely AIDS, disaster preparedness, nutrition, chronic diseases, and PAHO's Caribbean Cooperation in Health initiative; (2) to examine different types of health communication methodologies and strategies; and (3) to discuss problems in communicating about health to Caribbean audiences.

Following the opening session, which featured a keynote address by Barbados' Minister of Health, the Hon. Branford Taitt, on "Health and Media—Partners for Life," the health situation in the Caribbean area was reviewed briefly. The subsequent panel discussion dealt with health coverage in the Caribbean media. Representatives of print and broadcast media spoke of the difficulty sometimes encountered in obtaining health information from government agencies and the necessity of presenting that information to the Caribbean people in nontechnical language.

The next session pertained to health communication, including its goals, limi-

tations, and methodologies. The importance of taking into account the audience's traditional beliefs and practices when planning health communication was stressed, as was "creative communication," which involves the use of the vernacular languages, folk arts, and popular media events in communicating health messages.

The second day of the conference began with a discussion of nutritional problems and chronic noncommunicable diseases, many of which are caused or exacerbated by unhealthy behavior patterns and lifestyles. The afternoon session dealt with HIV infection and AIDS, with a review of medical aspects of the infection, the socioeconomic impact of AIDS, and emphasis on AIDS education campaigns, and the media's response to the AIDS epidemic and their responsibility to provide AIDS information.

The final day of the conference began with a review of disaster preparedness in the Caribbean area. It was declared that the public was underinformed about disaster-related issues and that disaster loss reduction strategies were inadequate or nonexistent in many countries. Also mentioned was the problem that a disaster had to be "front-page news" internationally to be noticed by developed countries. PAHO's video, entitled "Myths and Realities of Natural Disasters," was premiered, and other materials available from PAHO were noted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

During the final session, round table participants drafted a set of recommendations for submission to the Member Governments of CARICOM and all relevant national, subregional, and international agencies. These were as follows:

1. that national workshops be organized in conjunction with regional health and communications institutions to design mechanisms for improving health communication, including increasing information flow;
2. that the CARICOM Secretariat request Ministries of Health to pay particular attention to communicating about health issues and to work together with their respective Ministries of Information to improve health communication;
3. that national and subregional workshops be held to train media and other communications specialists in health matters, train health professionals in public communication techniques and methods, and teach health educators and health promoters to carry out their work more effectively;
4. that at least one information specialist be added to the staff of the PAHO Caribbean Program Coordinator's Office to disseminate health information;
5. that alternative communication methods and practices be fostered through the use of folk material, employment of the creative talents of local artists, and application of indigenous language, music, and dance;
6. that a subregional center be set up for the identification, collection, cataloguing, and dissemination of communication ideas, experiences, products, and other resources, and that appropriate steps be taken to protect relevant copyrights and safeguard royalties due for materials used;
7. that relevant resources available in international and subregional agencies, national public and private sectors, and nongovernmental organi-

zations be systematically identified and that such resources be mobilized for better health communications; and

8. that subregional health communication projects be evaluated, starting with the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute's radio program "With Healthy Living."

In summary, it was agreed that the national budgets of CARICOM countries cannot accommodate all the requirements of their health systems. The communication sector has the potential to make a significant contribution to the delivery of primary health care.



Bednets for Mosquito Control

From 14 to 18 February 1989 in Geneva, the World Health Organization (WHO) convened an informal consultation on the use of insecticide-impregnated bednets in conjunction with other means of vector-borne disease control. Participants included medical entomologists, social scientists, chemists, and physicians, as well as experts in environmental health and observers from industry. The meeting covered research on insecticide-treated fabrics, the choice of insecticides, and dosage and treatment methods. Attention was also given to questions such as suitability of treatment methods for use at the community level, safety precautions, and people's attitudes and social customs.

Impregnated bednets are simple to use and provide effective protection against insect bites of all kinds. Mosquitos are repelled or killed by the insecticide when they rest on the treated net surface. Tucked-in bednets also protect against snakes, rats, and cockroaches. It was noted, however, that there are problems of cultural acceptance of bednets and that they are uncomfortable in certain climatic conditions. Education was seen as a key to public acceptance and appropriate use of impregnated bednets.

In spite of its promise, scientists cautioned against presentation of this technique as a universal approach to vector control. Difficulties to be overcome include measures for the safe handling of insecticides and protection of the environment.

Source: World Health Organization. Press Release WHO/11. Geneva, 22 February 1989.