
Special Report: *Health Communication*



World Health Day 1989: Let's Talk Health

World Health Day commemorates the date 7 April 1948 when the Constitution of the World Health Organization was adopted. This year's theme was promoting health through better communication.

WORLD HEALTH DAY MESSAGE

Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of the World Health Organization

On the eve of the twenty-first century, it is increasingly clear that health goes hand in hand with economic and social development. We must talk about this—it *must* be said. Communication is a key element in today's world.

Every man, woman, and child should be in a position to choose a healthy way of life. To do this, people must be adequately informed on matters that have an influence on health: the environment, water, food, and what constitutes good and bad health habits.

The World Health Organization works to promote and protect public health. We need to identify people who can communicate and who can help others communicate about health at every level of society.

People with knowledge, information, and experience must learn to share what they know with others. In order to survive, everyone must adopt healthier

ways of living. Each person should feel responsible for his or her own health.

This year's World Health Day is devoted to the theme of communication for health. I would like to make a solemn appeal to all those responsible for informing, for educating, or for creating social dialogue: The cause of health needs you. Health is our most precious possession, both individually and collectively. Doctors, journalists, teachers, decision makers, parents, and friends, let us assume our responsibilities. Let us communicate health rather than disease. Let's talk health!

CELEBRATION AT PAHO

During the program held at Pan American Health Organization Headquarters to celebrate the occasion, special recognition was given to persons and groups whose work exemplifies the World Health Day theme.

Presiding at the ceremonies was Dr. Ronald Fletcher, Director of the Ohio State Department of Health. Dr. Carlyle Guerra de Macedo, Director of PAHO, delivered his annual World Health Day message (a condensed version of which appears as the Director's Letter on p. i in this issue). Other speakers included Dr. Reed Tuckson, Commissioner of Public Health for the District of Columbia, and

Dr. C. Everett Koop, Surgeon General of the United States.

Dr. Koop received a WHO Commemorative Medal for his efforts toward building a tobacco-free society. In his remarks he described how at the outset of his service as Surgeon General in 1981, he had decided to bring to the attention of the U.S. public results of the over 50,000 studies that have shown the incontrovertible dangers of smoking. Decreased rates of smoking among adults show that the public is getting the message. But faced with declines in the number of smokers in developed countries, the multinational tobacco companies, which Dr. Koop described as the very model of a colonial power, are turning their attention to the less developed world, and are pumping money into these countries' economies in the expectation of reaping even larger profits. However, they are also harvesting the health of the citizenry, since rates of morbidity and mortality from diseases related to smoking are increasing in every country that has opened its doors to the tobacco industry. Dr. Koop urged PAHO/WHO to redouble efforts to convince Member Countries that the physical health of their people is a necessity to achieve economic, social, and political health for the countries, and that the greatest single threat to physical health today is the smoking habit.

Other contributions toward communicating health messages were recognized with the presentation of two World Health Day Awards. One was given to actor Ted Danson for his public service announcement publicizing World Health Day, and the other to Bill Demby for his work in sensitizing the public to the needs and feelings of the disabled and in campaigning against drug abuse.

Two videos were shown as demonstrations of innovative techniques for health communication. The first, produced by Michigan State University's International

Health Project, documented that project's effort to acquaint medical, nursing, and veterinary students with topics in international health. The second was a production by students from Central Dauphin High School in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, aimed at preventing smoking among their peers.

Another presentation was a performance by the puppet theater "Kids on the Block," created by Ms. Barbara Aiello, which tours the country offering skits to educate schoolchildren on disabilities and other health and social problems. The performance dealt with AIDS education by means of a conversation between two friends, one a young adult who was a victim of the disease and the other a teenager who was trying to sort out its myths and realities.

WORLD HEALTH DAY PANEL ON COMMUNICATING FOR HEALTH

As part of the official observance of World Health Day, the Pan American Health Organization, as WHO's Regional Office for the Americas, and the American Association for World Health sponsored a panel discussion on health communication. Nine panelists, representing such fields as education, journalism, and health promotion, described the role played by their disciplines in increasing health awareness and knowledge. The panel covered individual, interpersonal, and mass communication techniques, ranging from community participation and nonformal education to the effective use of the mass media. The purpose was not only to demonstrate the diversity of communication techniques and strategies, but to help define the conditions that make one approach more appropriate or effective than another.

Mr. Burl Wagenheim, Public Affairs Officer of PAHO, acted as the moderator,

welcoming the audience and introducing the panel. He noted that a recent WHO report emphasized the use of the mass media and other communication techniques as part of an overall development strategy for health and recommended that training of health workers should include communication and educational approaches and methodologies. This year's World Health Day theme, with its slogans "Let's Talk Health" and "Health for All—Pass It Along," is part of WHO's call to intensify efforts aimed at health promotion, health education, and community participation.

Health Education in Schools

The first panelist to speak was Dr. Robert Gold, professor of health education at the University of Maryland, where he is also Director of the Minority Health Research Laboratory and Director of the Population Research Laboratory. He spoke on the role of schools as effective vehicles of health education, noting that there are six international theorems in this regard:

- (1) Health, education, and economic productivity are all inseparably interdependent.
- (2) The health problems of young children are unique and preventable. Child survival and development depend on educating parents and helping them carry out certain activities, such as having their children immunized, breast-feeding infants, and practicing good overall hygiene. There has been a "child survival revolution" for children under five, but the health gains in early life need to be supplemented and built upon later, in the classroom, if health development is to continue.
- (3) Teaching good health practices in schools can provide one of the most

efficient means available to improve the health of nations, as some countries have already discovered.

- (4) Schools are not currently being systematically employed for this purpose.
- (5) In order to improve the health of nations, schools require active collaboration and support from national health and education agencies and from the public. The problem of how to open lines of communication between educators and policy makers must be solved.
- (6) International statements of policy, such as the Declaration of Alma-Ata (1978) and WHO's Eighth General Program of Work for the period 1990–1995, provide strong general support for the use of schools as forums for health education.

Dr. Gold made the point that programs and policies aimed at intensified health education must be sustained after the special initiatives, such as World Health Day, are over.

Outreach to Risk Groups

Mr. Joseph Izzo is the AIDS Health Educator of the Whitman-Walker Clinic in Washington, D.C., and Co-director of that clinic's community outreach program for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) education, which began in 1986. His approach to health communication is strongly tied to his background and experience as a counselor and psychotherapist. The outreach program was originally focused toward intravenous (I.V.) drug abusers and prostitutes, and its goal was not only to impart information, but also to change attitudes and beliefs in the hope of encouraging changes in drug use and sexual behavior.

This type of effort requires one-to-one contact.

A number of problems were encountered early in the outreach program. Many members of the target population are functionally illiterate. In addition, their life-styles lead them to focus on the problems of daily existence, rather than long-term risks and consequences. A way was needed to personalize their perception of the risk of AIDS.

To this end, the program makes use of recovering addicts and former prostitutes as outreach workers. The messages and methods are kept simple. The literature distributed is small in size and concise. It includes the telephone number of the AIDS hotline and names and phone numbers of other sources of assistance. Condoms are distributed, as is bleach for disinfecting needles. The outreach workers realize that their target audience is not going to come to them, so they go to it: in clubs, bars, prisons, detention centers, and out on the streets. They also realize it is futile to try to communicate with someone who is chemically mood-altered. The best approach is to keep the message short and leave literature for the person to see when he or she is not under the influence, since it is safe to assume that the person will remain in the same area and can be contacted again.

Journalism and Health News

The next speaker was Ms. Abigail Trafford, editor of the "Health" section that appears every Tuesday in *The Washington Post* newspaper. She said that surveys had found much interest in health and social issues among the *Post's* readership; countrywide in the United States, about 70 newspapers now have health and science sections in response to readership demand. Health reporting often focuses on the newsworthy events or

sensational discoveries because they represent the most obvious stories. But she remarked that the current challenge for journalists specializing in health is to do more "enterprise" stories—in-depth investigations of health-related subjects that potentially affect everyone. She said the chief pitfall in the reporting of health news is the tendency to oversell a discovery, and for that reason she discouraged the use of the word "breakthrough" in her section.

Ms. Trafford maintained that health and science news is not too technical for the general public and that the very goal of this kind of reporting is to write about a complex subject in a way that can be widely understood. Further, because the audience is the general public, she believed that a journalistic curiosity is more important for the writer reporting on health than is a background in the subject matter.

Health Information Clearinghouse

The next panelist, Ms. Mary Jo Deering, is the Staff Director of Health Communication in the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) of the U.S. Public Health Service. She is also the Project Director of the ODPHP-operated National Health Information Center, a clearinghouse for health information, and she discussed the role of that Center.

She pointed out that health communication can do many things: it can increase awareness about health problems, influence attitudes, demonstrate and teach skills, reinforce correct attitudes and beliefs, and increase the demand for health services. However, it cannot compensate for a lack of services nor can it presume to produce behavior change without help from other, supportive programs.

The National Health Information Center has been in operation since 1979. One of its chief functions is as a referral service that puts persons who call or write for information in touch with organizations that can best respond to their questions. It will also refer questions to appropriate organizations so that they can reply directly to the requestor. In some cases, specialists on staff answer health questions, but even in these cases, the caller is referred to other sources for additional information. For this purpose the Center maintains a data base of over 1,000 health-related organizations, private and public, and the types of services they offer. It also produces publications, such as resource lists, directories, guides to funding sources, and bibliographies, and distributes other ODPHP publications.

In early 1989, the level of demand stood at about 2,200 telephone inquiries per month (up 50% from the January 1988 level) and 1,700 publication requests. From 50% to 60% of the inquiries come from the general public, and about 30% from health workers. Requests for information often focus on specific diseases; nutrition is also a prominent topic. The Center's toll-free number is (800) 336-4797.

A Puppet Show that Teaches

Ms. Barbara Aiello is the creator of the "Kids on the Block" puppet theater, which evolved as a result of her many years of teaching and consulting in the field of special education. The purpose of the puppets—each of which represents a child or young adult who is in some way "different"—is to teach children who are not disabled, ill, or otherwise experiencing a difficult problem to accept and appreciate others who are disabled or in special social situations.

The need for such a teaching mechanism was made evident by her personal

experience with "mainstreaming" special education students, that is, placing them in classes with unimpaired students. Although the special child may have been well prepared academically for the experience, neither that child nor the other students were emotionally prepared for the interaction, which often resulted in embarrassment and hurt. A number of different puppet characters were created to overcome the various barriers that keep people from being comfortable with the differences of others. Listening to the feelings expressed by the puppets allowed children to suspend emotional reality, bringing them to what Piaget called the "teachable moment."

As an illustration of this teaching method, Ms. Aiello introduced the audience to a puppet named Valerie Perkins, who represents a child born with spina bifida and who speaks eloquently about the desire of the disabled to be accepted for who they are rather than stigmatized for what they cannot do.

Interpersonal Communication

The next speaker was Dr. Timothy Edgar, an assistant professor in the University of Maryland's Department of Communication Arts and Theater. His research, which was the subject of his presentation, has dealt with the degree to which AIDS risk reduction messages are internalized, how they are communicated between sex partners, and, more broadly, the role of interpersonal communication in the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

AIDS prevention requires that both partners agree and cooperate to practice safer sex (for example, by using a condom). A variety of factors may operate to make communicating about AIDS difficult. A person who is concerned about

how he or she is perceived by a sex partner may not want anything negative, such as fear of disease, to be associated with sex. In addition, the person may be afraid that the partner will be offended at being asked to use a condom. If the partner is initially unwilling to comply, the subject may be dropped because of a desire to avoid conflict or reluctance to insist. Dr. Edgar said that the appropriate response would be to either veto sex or try to persuade, and to find out why the other person resists safer sex and then try to reframe the situation in a way that negates the other's objections. Thus, in instructing people how to prevent AIDS infection, it is necessary not simply to communicate, but to communicate about communicating.

"Enter-education"

Persons working in the field of population control were among the first to take advantage of communication in the service of health. In efforts to change people's attitudes about family planning and the use of contraceptives, they have integrated mass media techniques with traditional means of communication and with interpersonal approaches. Mr. José Rimon, Deputy Project Director of Population Communication Services at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs and a member of the Faculty of the School of Hygiene and Public Health, spoke about a project carried out in the Philippines that employed the strategy of "enter-education," or the use of entertainment for social change.

As part of the Philippine Young People's Project, two songs and their music videos featuring popular young singers were released commercially. The message of the songs was that teenagers should delay sexual activity until they are

older. As another part of the project, a telephone hotline for teens was set up, and 22 counseling and service centers were established in association with the Catholic church. There were also essay writing, singing, and dance contests in the schools. About \$300,000 was spent on the project, but corporations contributed labor, airtime, and materials worth \$1.4 million.

The video of one of the songs, "I Still Believe," which has lyrics in both English and Tagalog, was shown to the World Health Day audience. It had become a very popular song, but in order to see whether its commercial success had led to success as an education tool, market research was done to investigate the song's impact. Surveys showed high recall of the video by teens; 51% of those who recalled the video said it had influenced them; 70% interpreted the message of the song in an appropriate way; and 25% said they had sought contraceptive information as a result. Reaction to the song differed by sex, with 94% of the girls versus 86% of the boys saying they liked the song, and with 79.1% of females as opposed to 57.7% of males interpreting it appropriately. Many teenagers said they had made use of the hotline.

Health Messages on the Radio

The final speaker was Dr. Bailoti Lawrence, who hosts a radio show called "Total Well-being" on WPFW, a Washington, D.C., station. The message he communicates is that everyone should strive for excellence in health—physical, emotional, and mental. He said his work is based on the principle of cognitive restructuring; that is, through the media (radio, television, print) it is possible to send out information that can reshape the thinking patterns of the audience. The first necessary step is to reach out in

a way that gains the attention of the audience. Once there is access, information can be transferred. Radio puts the communicator in direct touch with the listeners' daily lives. It is important to communicate positive images, rather than

simply to lecture. One of the most important messages he tries to communicate is to love oneself, since to do so is a way of communicating health to oneself. He stated that this message is also a type of cognitive restructuring.



From Puppet Shows to Teleconferencing: Communicating Health in the Americas

Widespread and accurate dissemination of health information is a practical necessity for reaching those persons who have limited access to health care. Health workers cannot do this job alone; every citizen must become a conduit for health information. Owing to this realization, health promotion and health communication are being given increasing emphasis, and a variety of imaginative and creative new approaches are being undertaken. The following is a summary of some of these new ways of communicating health that are being tried and tested in the countries of the Americas, with the advice and active cooperation of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

Involving the Community

The Ministry of Health of Saint Lucia, in conjunction with PAHO, launched a mosquito control program to reduce the threat of dengue, a sometimes fatal illness, and of other diseases transmitted by insects. Community leaders were trained, taking into account what they themselves indicated that they wanted to learn. These leaders, in turn, imparted

information to their neighbors, speaking in native Creole, rather than English.

Community members began removing grass and other low brush, taking greater pains with garbage disposal, and eliminating standing water. The success they had in eliminating insect infestations spurred the people to continue their efforts. The experiment was so successful, and the rate of community participation so high, that the program is being extended to the nearby country of Dominica.

Multimedia Approaches

Over the past few decades, levels of breast-feeding had declined in many countries, including Chile. A 1972 survey showed that only about one-quarter of mothers in the capital city of Santiago were nursing their infants up to three months of age. In 1977, a breast-feeding promotion campaign was initiated through television, radio, and the press. However, aware that a mass media campaign alone would be insufficient, health educators made personal appeals to obstetricians and midwives to promote breast-feeding.