
Director's Letter



BECOMING HEALTH ADVOCATES

Health is not a luxury; health is a right, a need, the essence of life and well-being. Health is not a by-product of development; it is a necessary precondition without which people cannot lead normal lives, much less work and produce effectively. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean face a dilemma: they need a healthy population for economic and social development, but they lack sufficient resources to provide the necessary health services. With more than one-third of today's 400 million citizens of Latin America lacking access to regular, basic health care, and the population expected to reach 560 million by the year 2000, the magnitude of unmet health needs will become staggering unless efforts to rectify the situation are intensified and new solutions sought.

One such solution is to make health everyone's concern. This effort must begin with communicating health information—not the details of highly technical medical treatment, but basic, practical information that people everywhere can understand and put to use: information such as the need to immunize children, the benefits of breast-feeding, the hazards of casual and unprotected sex, the need to purify suspect drinking water, and the dangers of smoking and drug abuse. Not only are ordinary people capable of understanding these matters, but their sense of responsibility toward their home communities makes them ideal candidates for becoming health advocates responsible for spreading the word beyond their immediate families. When individuals are provided with relevant health information, they can make informed decisions about their own health, their families' health, and health in their communities.

The mass media have an important role to play in this effort by putting radio, television, newspapers, and magazines to use as means of conveying health messages. But media efforts must be reinforced by other educational activities that will serve to increase understanding and promote changes in behavior. And all of these activities must be carried out on a long-term basis.

With enough support, health promotion has the potential of providing the greatest benefits to the most people at the lowest cost, but effective health promotion will require better communication of health information. So, as this year's World Health Day slogan urges, "Let's Talk Health."



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