

Public health communication: some lessons for effectiveness

Communication lies at the heart of public health and plays a pivotal role in promoting core public health objectives. Health communication is seen as having relevance for virtually every aspect of health and well-being; including disease prevention, health promotion and quality of life ⁽¹⁾. Therefore; timely, accessible and credible health information is critical for improving public health outcomes.

Public health communication entails special importance in this digital era characterized with amazing information and communication technology (ICT). Two main factors further justify the need for effective health information delivery to people. One is that, the effects of behavior and lifestyle on health are being increasingly appreciated. Chronic diseases, epidemics and emerging health problems are now seen as strongly tied to human behavior. The other factor is that, the world is increasingly witnessing emerging health problems, outbreaks and public health threats. Experiences have shown that much damage in public health and public trust ensued out of inappropriate outbreak communication strategies.

To enhance effectiveness of public health communication, three dimensions should be considered. Firstly, public health communication should be viewed as having two domains; transmission based on the individual perception of risk and a ritualistic dimension based on the notion that communication does not occur in a social vacuum ⁽¹⁾. People do not just receive messages, but they give social meaning to them according to aspects such as their cultural explanation of disease. Therefore, ingredients of political, social and cultural environment should be considered in all components of communication process including message, source, channel and receiver ⁽²⁾. Secondly, health authorities should make use of social media that becomes more popular with the increasing access to internet and mobile communication. This is now challenging the traditional paradigm of source-receiver communication, changing the rules of the game from monologue to dialogue. With advents of services such as Face book, Wikipedia, You Tube and Twitter, an emergency message about an outbreak can be spread faster than any influenza virus ⁽³⁾. Thirdly, transparency

should be observed as a corner stone in building and sustaining public trust which is crucial for up-taking health messages. Ultimately, it is people who would choose to change their behavior to positively influence health outcomes. Therefore, transparency should be integral to any public health information policy.

In Sudan, public health communication is generally weak and health promotion remains largely a conceptual legacy with minimum implementation. Media, in particular journalism, often takes the role of interpretation and delivery of health messages to public bringing with it all limitations of a politically loaded, non professional source. Classical examples of public confusion were seen in times of epidemic outbreaks in the country mainly due to defective communication.

Sudan should make use of its potentials and the new approaches in communication. The rising public awareness should provide a lesson for the design and delivery of health information. Health authorities should also utilize the huge potential of social media making use of the good ICT infrastructure in the country. Finally, Sudan ministry of health is strongly advised to develop an explicit public health communication policy based on transparency and involvement of different stakeholders.

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