

## IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC HEALTH

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**Keywords:** importance, communication, public health

**Abstract:** This article stresses the importance, communication in the field of public health has in protecting human health, in the prevention and control of disease occurrence, quality of life and in promoting health. Healthy People 2010 report defines communication in public health as “the art and technique of informing, influencing and motivating individuals, institutions, the general public on the important issues of public health”.(1) An important role in promoting messages aiming at changing the unhealthy behaviours is played by the communication campaigns. The article also highlights the role of public health communication campaigns, an important part in producing behavioural changes.

**Cuvinte cheie:** importanță, comunicare, sănătate publică

**Rezumat:** Prezentul articol subliniază importanța pe care procesul de comunicare în domeniul sănătății publice o are în protejarea sănătății oamenilor, prevenirea și controlul apariției bolilor, îmbunătățirea calității vieții și în promovarea sănătății. Raportul Healthy People 2010 definește comunicarea în sănătatea publică ca fiind „arta și tehnica de a informa, influența și motiva indivizii, instituțiile, publicul larg cu privire la aspecte importante de sănătate publică”.(1) Un rol important în promovarea mesajelor care vizează schimbarea comportamentelor nesănătoase, îl au campaniile de comunicare. Astfel, articolul evidențiază rolul campaniilor de comunicare în sănătate publică, parte importantă în producerea schimbărilor comportamentale.

Communication is what represents us as people. It is our way to express ourselves, to exchange information, also having a symbolic capacity. It is recognized that the communication is instrumental (helps acquiring knowledge), but it also has a ritualistic function, in that it reflects people as members of a social community.(2) The efforts of interventions to change behaviours are also actions of communication. Focusing more on the function of transmitting information exchange, the symbolic, ritualistic function of communication is neglected. Therefore, in transmitting information – which is the primary role of communication, it is important to consider the channels through which messages are disseminated, to whom the message is addressed, how the public responds to the message and what are the characteristics that have the greatest impact on the public. All these highlight the components of the communication process: channel, source, receiver, message. Regarding the ritualistic component, the target audience is conceptualized as members of a social network, which interact with each other, participate in social activities and derive meaning from the normal behaviours.

As a separate part of the process of communication, public health communication has become in the recent decades, a concept and it is one of the basic components of public health. The importance given to this concept is illustrated by the inclusion for the first time of a chapter on communication in public health in the objectives of the Healthy People 2010 report.(2) This represents the scientific development, strategic dissemination and the critical evaluation of relevant, accurate and accessible public health information.(3)

The strategic, timely and effective communication plays the essential part to protect human health, to prevent and

control the occurrence of diseases, to improve the quality of life and to promote health. Communication in public health derives from a range of disciplines, such as marketing, journalism, public relations, psychology, computer science, epidemiology, health education, mass communication, being already well known that the media influences people's behaviour, either directly or indirectly, on medium or long term. Communication in public health includes the study and the use of communication strategies to inform and influence decisions at the individual or community level in terms of improved health.(4)

Communication in health contributes to all aspects of disease prevention and health promotion, with special relevance in many contexts, such as the professional relation between physicians and patients; the search for health information; patients' compliance to the clinical recommendations; developing messages and campaigns of public health; dissemination of information about health risks, in other words, risk communication; educating consumers on how to access health services system; development of IT applications in healthcare etc.(5)

The best way to transmit health information is through health communication campaigns. Health communication campaigns are taking into consideration changing or improving environmental or economic conditions with impact on the health status, individual risk factors and risk behaviours, therefore they must be well thought out so that the target audience be convinced that the changes that they should do would be in their own interest. In general, the main goals of public health communication campaigns are: raising awareness and improving public knowledge about some aspects of public health;

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influencing perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, unhealthy behaviours; knowing the benefits of changing the unhealthy habits; increased demand for health services; fighting certain myths or misconceptions; taking action to support the adoption of healthy behaviours; overcoming barriers in terms of access to health services.(6) Health communication campaigns can produce changes at individual, organizational and community level or at society level.(6)

*The individual*, interpersonal level is the fundamental level of public health communication because the individual communication determines the health status. Thus, communication influences the individual awareness, knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy, personal skills and the commitment to change behaviour. The actions directed to other people with a view to change behaviour can influence change at individual level, by involving the patients to take care of their own health.

*At group level*, informal groups, communication can have a significant impact on improving health through the relations that are formed within groups (workplace, school, hospital etc.). A healthy behaviour adopted by some, will be taken as an example to others much easier.

*Organizations*, that represent larger groups in number, with well defined structure and functions, can transmit information about health to their members, can offer support to the implementation of health campaigns or can even produce legislative changes.

*Communities* through their opinion leaders and decision makers represent true allies in influencing and determining the changes in policies, products, services. By influencing communities, health communication campaigns can promote awareness raising on a particular aspect of health, changes in attitudes and beliefs, support for the adoption of healthy behaviours (e.g., at community level, there can be established bicycle lanes that promote physical exercise). The last and perhaps the most important level that can produce the change, is the *society* that can change the behaviour of individuals by influencing norms, values, opinions, laws and policies. By changing attitudes and behaviours at individual level, health communication campaigns at society level actually change the social norms.

Communication campaigns are based on a number of principles: to be goal-oriented, namely to inform, persuade, influence or motivate behaviour change; are aimed at individuals, organizations, societies; are directed to a relatively large audience; they do not bring commercial benefits to individuals or to the society; are conducted over a period of time ranging from a few weeks to years; are most effective, as it turned out, if the media are involved.(7)

In order to conduct a successful and effective campaign, the following conditions must be met(7): the production of high quality messages, choosing the best sources and transmission channels through needs assessment, after conducting the necessary research; spreading the message to the target audience frequently, consistently and in a sustained manner; drawing the attention of potential receivers; encouraging interpersonal communication regarding the campaign theme; changes in awareness, current knowledge, behaviour; producing changes at community and society level; conducting evaluations to acquire systematic knowledge about the impact produced.

Health communication campaigns use a range of channels in order to transmit the message: media through television and radio stations (thematic programmes, news, advertising, information materials etc.); briefing sessions, individual or group counselling; thematic activities organized at community level; school activities; marketing strategies;

developing partnerships (local authorities, non-profit associations that support the development of communication campaigns). A health communication campaign alone cannot cause complex changes of behaviour without the extensive programmes to support health promotion, including health services, the entire health system, health technologies, as well as changes in legislation and policy. Also, a health communication campaign may not be as effective in addressing all aspects regarding the transmitted messages, as the subject or the behaviour that is intended to be changed can be extremely complex or controversial, and the target audience may be prejudiced or be distrustful to embrace change.

For a health communication campaign to produce the expected results (e.g. changing unhealthy behaviours: reducing the consumption of sweets among children), it is crucial that it should be based on rigorous planning, which if it is observed carefully, it can avoid crises and barriers in implementation, as well as any possible additional costs.(8) The main steps in designing a health communication campaigns are: health problem analysis, data review and the identification of possible solutions; establishing the purpose and the objectives of the campaign; determining the target population; creating the messages to be transmitted as well as the different communication channels; pre-testing, analyzing and reviewing the messages; campaign implementation and impact assessment of the communication campaign.(9) These steps are part of a cyclical, continuous process of planning and quality adjustment, in which the last stage complements the first one.(8)

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