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Keynote Speech

By

S T Han
I wish to express my thanks to the organizers of this seminar -- the International Children's Centre, Paris, the Union Internationale des Organization Familieux, and the Asian Mass Communications Research and Information Centre or AMIC -- for the opportunity to be with you this morning.

For many reasons, I find this seminar very significant.

First of all, it is because of the venue. Singapore continues to be a leader in health work, a very active supporter of WHO and provides a spotless example of and a valuable training area for public health. One of the oldest newspapers in the region -- The Straits Times, established in 1845 -- is here and I have no doubt that it has contributed much to the formation of the well-informed citizenry in this Republic.

The seminar is also very meaningful to us at WHO because it is sponsored by institutions equally as concerned as we are in the well-being of peoples everywhere - and in communications for health.

When I speak of the mass media I limit myself to the daily newspapers, popular magazines and periodicals, radio and television networks which are primarily purveyors of news, opinion and entertainment. In the ASEAN countries, they are mostly privately-owned commercial enterprises established and managed for profit.
YOU ARE TO TAKE UP THE EDUCATIVE ROLE OF MEDIA IN RELATION TO MATERNAL MORTALITY. LET ME FIRST TALK OF THE EDUCATIVE ROLE OF MEDIA IN GENERAL. I WILL, LATER ON, SPEAK ON THE HEALTH CARE OF MOTHERS AND CHILDREN.

In theory, it is accepted that media not only inform but also educate its readers or listeners. This is a responsibility that the media must accept and carry out especially in many developing countries. I would say they have no choice. Due to the low literacy rate or the lack of books, radio and newspapers become the major, if not the only, sources of information and knowledge for people in many rural communities.

Yet this question can be raised properly: Is the "educative role" understood, accepted and carried out by the mass media services?

I question here the way health news is presented in newspapers or through the airwaves. For example, must they be sensationalized? Must we alarm or frighten people to deliver health messages? Who decides on the manner of its presentation? Are health reporters given adequate training in writing about health?

Time and again, meetings emphasize that health education and information services need the media. This time, I say the media needs education in health. And I mean not just in the technical sense, for the news writers, editors and programmers. Those who decide policies, those who determine the contents in space or time also need a wide perspective, deeper appreciation and understanding of health issues affecting the community.
As one general example, I venture the observation on the continued ambivalent attitude of the mass media toward the issue of tobacco or health. How does one reconcile this "educative role" with the tobacco advertising carried regularly by the mass media?

I mention another example. To promote breastfeeding there is an international understanding against advertising of feeding bottles and teats, among others. Yet we see this being violated by newspapers, magazine and TV networks.

Is the educative role secondary or subservient to profit?

Thus, I say that we, in the health sector, should not be deluded by our own estimate of the importance of health news. To the deskman in the editorial room or the TV programmer, health news is simply an item competing for limited space and time. To the businessman or corporate body, revenue may take precedence over health concerns of the community.

This, then, is a right time for me to repeat my claim that media needs education in health. I would propose regular training sessions or workshops in health for news editors, copy writers, TV programmers, commentators or radio announcers. Or any alternative method to reach them, as I know it would not be possible to get them out of their desks for such workshops or training sessions.

I am told one other topic, before you, pertains to the effects of the media on children. I suppose television would be an example.
WE AGREE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE THESE DAYS ARE EXPOSED TO A GREAT DEAL OF VIOLENCE, SEX AND CRIME THROUGH THE PICTURE TUBE. WE ARE DISMAYED BY THE UNDUE ACCENT ON "GLAMOUR" OF CIGARETTE AND ALCOHOL ADVERTISING, ESPECIALLY THOSE DIRECTED TO THE YOUTH.

ARE THESE OBSERVATIONS VALID AGAINST THE ENTERTAINMENT FUNCTION OF THE MEDIA? CAN THE MEDIA SIMPLY SAY THAT THEY ARE JUST A MIRROR OF SOCIETY, RESPONDING ONLY TO WHAT THEY PERCEIVED ARE THE DEMANDS OR NEEDS OF THEIR AUDIENCES?

IF THESE COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE MEDIA ARE VALID, WHAT ALTERNATIVES CAN WE SUGGEST TO THEIR ADVERTISING OR BUSINESS MANAGERS? WILL THESE BE ACCEPTABLE TO THEM?

I SUBMIT THAT THESE QUESTIONS ARE RELEVANT TO YOUR SEMINAR.

ADDITIONALLY DURING YOUR PANEL DELIBERATIONS ON CHILD/FAMILY HEALTH, I WOULD ASK YOU TO CONSIDER THESE ITEMS:

1. MOTHERS AND CHILDREN CONSTITUTE TWO-THIRDS OF THE TOTAL POPULATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES.

2. WOMEN IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES RUN THE HIGHEST RISK OF DYING FROM A PREGNANCY. THEY ALSO BEAR THIS RISK MORE FREQUENTLY AND OVER A LONGER PERIOD OF THEIR LIVES.

3. WORLD-WIDE, AT LEAST 500 000 WOMEN DIE FROM CAUSES RELATED TO PREGNANCY EACH YEAR. NINETY-NINE PER CENT OF THESE DEATHS OCCUR IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES.
4. In the WHO Western Pacific Region, maternal deaths range from less than 10 to over 1,000 per 100,000 live births. More than ninety percent of the deaths of mothers can be prevented with technologies that are already proven safe and cost-effective.

5. More than half of infant deaths occur within the first four weeks of life or the neonatal period, mostly related -- and this I underline heavily -- to the health problems of the mother. Further reduction of infant mortality rates can be done only by improving the health care of mothers during pregnancy as well as during and after childbirth.

Confronted with this situation, the WHO regional programme for mother and child health and family planning has set some targets by the end of this century, among which are:

- To cut by 50 percent the rate of maternal mortality from the present level.
- To reduce infant mortality rate to below 50 per 1,000 live births.
- To immunize 95 percent of children against diphtheria, tetanus, whooping coughs, measles, poliomyelitis and tuberculosis.

Further, I would also specifically request you to consider that family planning has an impact on or directly contributes to the survival of the child and to the reduction of maternal deaths. Efforts should be exerted to make family planning services easily accessible to couples wishing to plan their childbirth.

It would be most appropriate if you will think of effective ways to enlist the active participation of news media services in the attainment of these targets.
In July 1980 the Ministers of Health of ASEAN countries met in Manila to strengthen and coordinate regional cooperation in health. As media specialists from ASEAN countries, you can help bring about a closer collaboration in health in the region.

In that meeting the Ministers agreed to make health care accessible to the total population with priority being given to the underserved and depressed areas. In many countries, mothers and children belong to the underserved members of the community. I hope you agree that mothers and children deserved to be taken off from their underserved category.

And, to paraphrase a song, "The world will be better for all", if we have healthy mothers and children.

Finally, as a form of participation and our contribution to the Seminar, we have some documents and other materials which will be distributed to the participants. I hope you find them useful.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you a successful seminar.