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The Role Of The Media In Promoting Family And Health Care

By

Aishah Ali
The Role of the Media in Promoting Family and Health Care

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The story that hogged page one in all Malaysian newspapers most of last week was the diptheria outbreak in a religious settlement in Kuala Lumpur.

A child died and 20 people were warded. The place was put under quarantine and the health department is now working round the clock getting residents immunised.

The news item of course took everyone by surprise. Whoever heard of diptheria in this day and age and in the capital city too?

But it showed two things. First, the diptheria outbreak caused as a result of infants in the community not having completed their immunisation, the triple antigen, could have perhaps been avoided had the problem of parents neglecting this aspect of childcare been highlighted in the form of warnings given to parents. In other words the media could have played a role here.

Apparently, the health ministry was aware of this fact and on a few occasions some doctors had spoken about mothers not bringing back their babies to complete the boosters.

And it was only after the shocking outbreak that the health minister * revealed this appalling state of apathy, that at least 40 per cent of children have not received the full triple antigen that protects them against tetanus, whooping cough and diptheria. At the same time, they are also immunised against polio and have to receive booster doses when the child reaches the age by 1 1/2 to 5 years. Nowadays, hepatitis B vaccines are also given to newborns.

Secondly, the event highlighted an important factor that often impede the role of the press in dissemination of such information - religion. But I will come to that later.

The point I am making is, like most government machinery, the Health Ministry or the Family Planning Board and other sources of stories pertaining to health and childcare, are not sensitive to the role ot the media can play to help them publicise their projects, ideas, propaganda, etc.

*In 1987, 4 out of 10 babies did not complete immunisation.
But the media has always committed itself to promoting health stories. Practically all of the major newspapers run columns on health. Columns like Dear Doc (Sun Times), Heartbeat (Malay Mail), Health (Sunday Mail), Health Sports and Fitness (Star), Kesihatan (Berita Harian) and many more in the vernacular papers encourage readers to write to resident doctors who answer their weekly queries.

And the overwhelming response to these columns clearly indicate that some people are quite inhibited when it comes to confronting doctors with their problems, however small. So, this is one form of service offered by the print media.

As for hard news, health stories have often been given space and prominence for the same reason that we have a duty to inform. However, newspapers are merely passive receivers and generators of information. We report news obtained at press conferences or events like blood donation campaigns or cancer awareness exhibitions were speeches made by ministers and director-generals of health ministry contain newsworthy points. And we disseminate.

Seldom do we initiate. Again, because relevant and topical information or problems are not communicated to use from the sources.

If the stories are important then editors normally assign reporters to do follow-ups for indepth features.

For instance, not too long ago our Health Ministry launched a campaign on rubella where women and girls in the 15 to 44 age bracket were offered free immunisation.

The initial reports that newspapers, radio and television carried were of the minister’s announcement on the importance of the immunisation. This might be followed-up by picture stories on mobile units visiting schools, colleges, factories, shopping complexes and women queueing up to receive the vaccines.

But since rubella is new and a large section of the public may not be familiar with the consequences and risks of the disease to pregnant women, the campaign was further aided in the form of special features in the women’s pages and women programmes on TV and radio to educate women in giving an indepth view of the situation.

Subsequently, queries and feedbacks on the subject were entertained in "letters to the editor" pages. For instance, the rubella campaign had resulted in some women in their early stages of pregnancy being immunised without them realising. There was public outrage against the authorities for not being careful and further outrage when the Health Minister denied this in Parliament. And doctors retaliating and saying otherwise.

Other current campaigns have also been given the same treatment, like Hepatitis B, Kidney diseases, AIDS and the immunisation...
programmes. Of course, other on-going ones like pap-smear, drugs menace, anti-smoking, less-sugar consumption, infant nutrition, breast-feeding and accidents-prevention are being reinforced frequently both in the print and electronic media.

But the current priority is food hygiene. This follows the spate of food poisoning in schools, colleges and in some villages. In one instance, 13 children were killed after eating noodles from hawkers in Ipoh, and soon after that college students in another part of the country, were rushed to the hospital after consuming canteen food.

In another incident several people contacted food poisoning and an old lady died after a kenduri (feast). Then there was a family of five who were warded after eating corn.

The ministry attributed this to poor food handling and thus resolved to educate the public through health messages on TV and newspapers.

The question we have got to ask is whether the media have succeeded in reaching its target audience. Whether the success of these campaigns can be attributed to media coverage.

As we know the media merely provides the climate for pollination. Only the literate utilise print media and the well-to-do, the electronic media especially television. Ideally of course, the best form of communication is interpersonal. And when it comes to the questions on say, breast-feeding, contraceptives or pap-smear, people want to hear it from an authority, a person, especially someone they can trust.

No matter, since health mobile units cannot penetrate every nook and corner of the world, the next best is of course the media. How far have they been effective?

Most of those who deal with the press at the Health Ministry, Malaysian, National Populations and Family Planning Board, Medical Association, agree that their campaigns would not have succeeded without media help. Unfortunately, there has been no attempt to gauge the effectiveness of the role of the media in these campaigns. There have been no surveys done and only public response tells the success or failure of certain projects.

For instance, then the Health Ministry first announced the Hepatitis B campaign, the response had been enormous, according to its Public Relations Officer (PRO). Although the immunisation is only offered to babies, medical staff and select groups like drug addicts, the ordinary public came asking for the jabs. When asked they said they had read the papers and heard the radio.

Similarly, when the MMA recently launched the anti-smoking campaign, it found in a survey that 82 percent of the public throughout Malaysia, was aware of the campaign through the media. Of course whether they stopped smoking after that, is a different
The National Population and Family Planning Board PRO is of the opinion that while the press have been helpful, the Board and to a large extent the Ministry could have made better use of the media. The MMA in one of their recommendations at the end of a seminar they held, resolved to utilise the press more in future. This shows their awareness on the media importance.

The print media will continue to be liberal in their coverage of health promotion, out of a sense of conviction to serve the people, but I think more can be done on television which undisputedly is the most effectively form of communication.

True, some campaigns in the form of documentary, trailers and filmlets have been shown, but they are not as effective in terms of production (perhaps due to lack of budget).

This where the private sector like large corportion can lend support in terms of sponsoring health campaigns on TV. Some associations, like Lions Club, Rotary Club, The British and American Women's Association, have contributed in the form of funds to projects like cancer, autistic children, the handicapped, the blind and so on. Perhaps they can be persuaded to sponsor TV campaigns for its wide-reaching effect.

For example, In a survey conducted by the health ministry about three years ago, it was clear that radio and TV were most effective in getting their message across. In one out of those who said that they have even watched TV 976 (94.7) are aware of the health information disseminated through the programme. 93.6% of these respondents are satisfied with the health information and 96.2 say that they benefited from the programme. 95.8% say that they would like to have further information on health.

From the above results, it is evident that radio and TV are acceptable channels of communication among the community and should therefore be utilised to the maximum to educate the community on health matters. Apart from their high acceptability by the community, this survey also indicates the multiples efforts from radio and television whereby at least 70 of respondents who were exposed to the health information from the channels, reported that they passed their information to other people. The health programmes on radio and TV have also generated interest on the part of the community to find out further information about the health topics that were discussed. Sources of information that were named were health centers and health staff on home visits. Hence, it is suggested that these sources should be adequately prepared and oriented more information on health topics, that were discussed on radio and TV to the public.

Lastly, it must be said that the role of the media can sometimes be hampered. I mentioned earlier how the diptheria outbreak at
the Muslim settlement in Kuala Lumpur had proven that there are barriers that impede the flow of information. In this case it is religion. Other factors are political, (Muslim group), I mentioned earlier, social, economic and ignorance.

Let me elaborate. In the case of the Arkam settlers, the group do not believe in immunisation programme, alleging that the vaccines are haram (forbidden). They might have known and read about the dangers of not completing the boosters which in Malaysia remains largely voluntary. Then again they might not as their religious beliefs may not even tolerate Television watching. So, they can never be influenced by the media.

The same can be applied to attitudes towards rubella and hepatitis B. There are quarters who resist them on religious grounds or through ignorance. As for the latter, perhaps more education programmes can be implemented and effort to reach the suburban poor, stepped up.

But as most villages are only a short distance away from health clinics these days, it must be attitude and attitude change is not easy to achieve among the uneducated who are set in their ways. And this is the media's big challenge.