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<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/639">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/639</a></td>
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Health Education In The Media (Singapore)

By

Sivanesvary Arulanandam
Health Education in the media
(Singapore)
Mrs Sivanesvary Arulanandam

When the Ministry of Health formulated its rolling five year health education plan in 1982, chronic illnesses such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and certain cancers were given priority as they were the leading causes of death. Programmes in other developed countries (North Karelia, USA) had clearly illustrated that the toll of these diseases can be reduced by changing harmful lifestyles ie smoking, poor eating habits, stress and not exercising regularly.

As these lifestyles take root at a young age, children form an important target for such health education programmes. Obesity is the second most common health problem among school children in Singapore. The infant mortality rate is among the lowest in the world and Singapore has a comprehensive primary care service that provides antenatal care, free childhood immunization and family planning services besides other medical for the population. However the health of infants and children cannot be isolated from the health and education of mothers and other adults. Besides the importance of a healthy pregnancy, resulting in a healthy baby, mothers influence the health related habits of their children. To have an effect on child health education, others to research would be mothers-to-be, young parents, child-care givers and teachers. To achieve this the mass media becomes an important adjunct to face-to-face strategies.
We have an 80% literacy rate. The broadcast and press media are in the four official languages, enabling them to reach even those literate only in their own mother tongue. 97% of adults live in homes with a colour television set. Most homes also own a radio and receive at least one of the main daily newspaper. The advent of the VCR has also made video programmes an essential educational tool.

The Ministry of Health has over the last five years conducted different mass media education programmes utilising the various media, complemented by community based programmes. Although the mass media programmes are generally targetted to the whole population, the community based programmes are targetted to special groups. In 1984, the Ministry began the 'healthy lifestyle' approach to intervention. Several talks and exhibitions were held supported by print media. Children had booklets specially designed with simple, relevant messages. VCR and TV screens were set up in waiting areas in polyclinics and hospitals. Videoprogrammes on topics ranging from antenatal care, prevention of home accidents, nutrition, dental care, personal hygiene to heart disease and diabetes are screened. These provide both relevant and useful information to the waiting patients and their families (both young and old).

A video studio was set up at the Training and Health Education Department (THE) to produce its own programmes and dub foreign programmes (which permission) into local languages. A loan service is available to all interested organisations besides schools and clinics.
In 1986, the Healthy Heart Healthy Life programme was launched with an intensive multi-media campaign that made 'Hearty' the programme logo a recognisable central character for heart health. Although the programme aimed to appeal to all age groups in the various media, the radio programme was meant specially for children. The Health Educator, a quarterly from THE which has 100,000 circulation carries a heart health message from the Xin family, in a cartoon strip. Currently this programme is being repeated in the mass media to coincide with the launch of the 'Heart Health' Package. This is a review of students' workbooks, teacheres' manuals and audiovisual aids. It has been introduced as a supplement to the Health Education programme in primary schools this year. The package is on interactive way to inculcate good health habits from a young age. To publize the contents of the package a lifesize Hearty boardwalker visits primary schools, entertaining the children while disseminating the messages.

Children have always been a special focus group of anti-smoking education programmes (eg the Superman vs Nick-o-teen programme in Programme further concentrated our efforts as we aimed to move 'Towards a nation of non-smokers'. One phase of the campaign was devoted to the youth. A pop-video style TV commercial was used, supported by posters, booklets quiz contests in magazines. Three video programmes that discussed and illustrated how to withstand peer pressure, analyse cigarette advertisements and how to say 'No' to cigarettes were screened to school children. In addition to the special focus given during
short term (one month - 3 months) mass media campaigns. THE has an ongoing programme to use the various media to inform and educate young and old Singaporeans on health matters.

Television

In Singapore as in most countries television is chiefly an entertainment medium. It is difficult to achieve the screening of educational programmes at prime time. The Singapore Broadcasting (SBC) a private organisation will also not make its own health related programmes for free (except documentaries when there is a national health programme or concern). The Ministry has therefore budgetted for its production and telecast of health programmes in addition to the budget for mass media campaigns ie TV commercials, radio spots, print and magazine advertisements.

Some programmes carried out.

1. 'In the Pink', a 13-part weekly series on heart health was produced. It was excented in a lively magazine format with local personalities and authorities giving their personal lifestyles and advice.

2. Tips on how to make changes in lifestyle were included as a segment in two popular local Chinese family magazine programmes. These had a captive audience who received the messages in a variety of entertaining ways ie dialogue, drama, contest, etc.

3. In 1988, the Training and Health Education Department commissioned the production of a health segment 'Action for Health' in Sunday Morning Singapore' a family magazine programme in English. A variety of health topics have been covered in this programme including smoking, diabetes, proper use of medicines, how to manage common ailments, exercise for the family, hypertension and AIDS.

4. The public interest in health has also encourage private organisations to sponsor the telecast of foreign health programmes especially on antenatal and child care. Although not screened at prime time, interested viewers will tune it or record it on video for reference.
Radio

This is an ideal medium (with selective time usage) to reach housewives, young people and the working ethnic groups. Listenership of women is over 90% so antenatal care, child and other programmes of women's interest have been serialised over radio and Rediffusion. Although some of these programmes are done in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, most are initiated by the media owners themselves with sponsors paying for the broadcast. Recent topics covered have been the social development of children, genetic counselling developmental milestones for children and hepatitis B immunization for newborns.

Press

The newspapers regularly feature health topics both generated locally or from overseas reports. The press covers local health programmes by estimating its "news worthiness" or its relative importance. The articles are largely news reports rather than educational.

THE has since Nov 88, started a regular column in the Sunday Times. Other health professionals or organisations have contributed to such columns.

Print Media

Manuals on child care available in bookshops have been the bibles for many young mothers. In recent years parenting magazines have sprouted up as a response to the popularity of
these topics. THE has its own mother and child-care book which is printed in sufficient numbers to be given free to every new mother. THE also produces pamphlets on a wide range of health topics. These are widely distributed in schools, clinics, community centres and work places in relation to their topic and target. These pamphlets introduce new services available for the public. THE also has a regular article in the 'Our Home' magazine which reaches 80% of Singaporeans mother and child care booklets are easily available from commercial milk marketing firms. Popular women's magazines also feature different health topics of interest to their readers.

Problems

1. The avalanche of health information can itself create confusion. We assume that most people are intelligent, educated, able to analyze the information received, make the right judgement and respond correctly. This is not necessarily true. Are all readers/viewers/listeners able to sieve the facts from fiction. Is there a need for a need for a central clearinghouse to be consulted on such reports, putting the content in the local context.

2. The Ministry of Health has become another commercial utiliser of the media. The media owners respond to the budget available rather than with a belief on commitment to the health problem. Hence the media can be contradictory and sometimes not credible eg. using fast food commercials immediately after a health segment on atherosclerosis. More efforts are needed to involve the media in planning and execution of health programmes to reflect their belief and commitment.