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Public Health Issues Requiring Mass Media Support - Republic Of Palau

By

Masao Kumangai
COUNTRY REPORT
OF
ROUNDTABLE
ON
HEALTH AND THE MEDIA:
FORGING A PARTNERSHIP IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Kingdom of Tonga, September 22-26, 1986

BY

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September 1986
REPUBLIC OF PALAU

PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES REQUIRING
MASS MEDIA SUPPORT

This paper provides a brief overview of a major public health problem and how the mass media can play an increased role in our health education efforts. We welcome this opportunity to present our needs at this roundtable and hope that this meeting will provide all of us with the impetus necessary to strengthen health education efforts throughout the Pacific.

Palau's Geographic and Demographic Characteristics:

The Republic of Palau is the westernmost archipelago of the Caroline Islands group in Micronesia. Palau lies just east of the southern islands of the Philippines and north of part of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. There are approximately 200 islands with a combined land area of around 90 square miles. Ten of these islands are permanently inhabited. In the exception of a few islands, the land area is a high island archipelago located within a single barrier reef. This fact has made for cultural homogeneity and relative ease of transportation and communication throughout the Republic.

Palau is divided into 16 states, 10 of which are located on the large coastal islands of Babelthaup. The small island of Koror, just south of Babelthaup, is the present administrative center of Palau. Close to 70% of the entire population live on this small island. Preliminary results of the 1986 mini-census show a de facto population of 13,772 in Palau, 11% of whom are non-Palauans. Palau has an exceedingly young population with 2% under 25 years of age.
The Health Care Delivery System:

With the exception of one private practice physician on the island of Koror, all health care is delivered by the National government system where all services are either heavily subsidized or free. The system includes a 65 bed hospital, a dental clinic, a sanitation/environmental health office, an outpatient clinic and a public health program. The Division of Public Health in the Bureau of Health Services staffs eight field dispensaries in the outlying and intermediate areas with Health Assistants who have received 18 months of training in Koror.

One of the strengths of the government-run system is that all care and programs can be organized to avoid duplication of effort and to maximize very limited resources. Also, programmatic change is relatively easy to introduce since there is only one major health care system to work with.

One weakness in the system is that we have been unable to replace our Health Educator who resigned in 1980. Physicians and nurses have been doing most of the health education work with the patients and their families. There has also been a limited amount of community outreach.

Mass Media In Palau:

There is one AM radio station in Palau which is located in Koror. The station is government-owned and operated with a broadcast capacity of 5000 kilohertz. Unfortunately, due to the location of the tower, the power is limited to only 3,000 watts and a range of 150 miles. Usually 99% of Palau's population can pick up the broadcast on the radio. The 1% of the population located outside of the broadcast range uses shortwave radio to pick up broadcasts from Australia and elsewhere.
No study has been done to determine the extent the radio is listened to and by whom. An employee at the station is presently attending a course in audience research and a study should be conducted within the next year. However, the Station Manager estimates that approximately 98% of all households in Palau have a radio. In most households the radio is listened to at least part of the day. Broadcast hours are from 6am to 11pm.

Palau also has one, privately-owned television station which provides services in Koror. Out of the 1,235 households in Koror, 450 of them are subscribing to the television service which costs U.S. $20.00 for hook up and then U.S. $15.00 each month. It is estimated that there are more televisions in Koror and other areas of Palau which are using Video Players and do not subscribe to the television service. A wide variety of VHS video cassettes are available in Palau for daily rental. The television service broadcasts only U.S. television programs with the exception of public service announcements. Only a few locally-prepared programs are broadcast each year. The television station is on the air from 3:00p.m. to 11:30p.m. each day.

The only newspaper presently in Palau is issued by the Office of the President about 18 times a year free of charge. Circulation is not widespread nor is it an appropriate vehicle for health education messages.

Public Health Issues:
If only Palau's number one public health problem was a disease with a cause, such as a virus. If only a vaccine could be developed to prevent it from spreading to younger and younger people. If only once it was diagnosed, we could treat it with some medicine and it would go away—perhaps leaving the victim immune from subsequent attacks. If only it didn't kill so many and leave others sick, disabled and confused.
If only...if only....

Unfortunately, the complexities of our number one public health problem, substance abuse, will never be easy to diagnose, treat and cure. Alcohol and drug abuse are by and far the most important public health issue in Palau today. They cause much disability and death and erode the very fabric of this closely-knit country.

Although there is no one in Palau who would disagree that substance abuse is our major public health problem, we have had difficulties in identifying the scope of the problem and in obtaining reliable data. For a little over four months in 1985 we looked at all types of injuries seen in our Outpatient Clinic and Hospital Emergency Room. Health workers had repeatedly claimed that most trauma patients were intoxicated at the time of their visit to the hospital for treatment. In this small study, we found that 76% of all patients with injuries had been consuming alcohol at the time of their injury. Fifty-one percent of all injuries occurred to patients between 20-29 years of age and that 90% of these patients were under the influence of alcohol. Treatment of 69% of the cases took place between 6:01pm and 3:00am. We concluded from this study that there is a close association between alcohol consumption and injury. Few of the injuries were related to employment or occupation. In our Outpatient Clinic, injuries and adverse effects is the second leading cause for visits with only two cases less than for visits for diseases of the respiratory system in 1984.

It is more difficult to identify patients who have mixed alcohol and drugs or who have taken only drugs. Although we have no data to substantiate this information, it is believed that the smoking of marijuana is common, particularly among young men. Cocaine, heroin and other drugs are also used
but these drugs appear to be less common than marijuana.

We are aware that the mortality rate due to alcohol and drug abuse is too high, both as primary and secondary causes of death. Unfortunately, we do not have data to substantiate this. The greatest tragedies are the nights when a young man is brought to the Emergency Room dead on arrival. This happens all too often and, invariably, alcohol and perhaps drugs played a role in his untimely and unnecessary passing.

Past Cooperation Between Public Health and the Media:

We have a small Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Program in our Division of Public Health which is very ably run by a Medical Officer with training in Psychiatry, a Registered Nurse and two Graduate Nurses. As is too often the case throughout the Pacific, this small office cannot possibly solve the large problem of alcohol and drug abuse which we have in Palau. However, they are trying to do as much as possible.

Radio programs are made about once a month. Each program is between 10 and 30 minutes in length and is broadcasted twice a day for one week. Sometimes the radio programs are rebroadcast several months later. There is no charge for these broadcasts. Recent radio programs have placed emphasis on the signs and symptoms of alcoholism.

Programs on alcohol and drug abuse are also aired on television. Recent television programs included one on the danger of methyl bromide which was being played with by school age children; one 30 minute program entitled "Never One for the Road" and, another program entitled, "Father Martin's Guidelines to Help the Alcoholic" which was 45 minutes long.
Television time can be very expensive. The commercial rate is $30 a minute. The privately-owned Station usually airs our programs for $200 a program, regardless of the length of the program.

No research or evaluation has been conducted to determine the effectiveness of either the radio or the television in educating the public regarding the dangers of substance abuse. It was reported, however, by the Coordinator of the Office of Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health that the programs seemed to be very well accepted in the community. Also it appears that more people come in for counseling or other types of help after a program has been aired.

Future Plans and Needs:

We believe that the use of mass media is an effective way to communicate to our people and to educate them. Our major problem is that we need some technical expertise in developing programs since we need to learn about how to make more appealing and creative programs. One of our difficulties stems from the lack of both audio and visual equipment. For example, most of our television programs feature a nurse sitting at a desk talking to the camera. The lighting is harsh; little editing is available.

We believe that the use of radio and television are very effective tools in educating the public on health matters. Much more could be done if we were able to receive some assistance in producing programs and could use some additional equipment.