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Speech

By

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SPEECH BY ENCIK WAN HUSSIN ZOOHRI, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (HEALTH & CULTURE) AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE ROUND TABLE ON "MASS MEDIA AND THE PROMOTION OF PUBLIC HEALTH & NUTRITION IN ASEAN" ON 20 JUNE 84 AT THE ASIAN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND INFORMATION CENTRE, 39 NEWTON ROAD, SINGAPORE 1130 AT 9.00 A.M.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It cannot be denied that the mass media has become an important part in the lives of most people. This is especially so in urbanized and industrialised societies where modern technology has asserted great influence.

The impact of mass media in modern societies is far reaching. There is a radio and a television set in almost every home, and one or more daily newspapers in the language of choice. Journals and magazines are common. Posters are seen by the public as they move about their daily business. It is generally accepted that the mass media is capable of influencing us, persuading us and affecting our opinions, attitudes and behaviour to a great extent.

In addition to face-to-face communication methods, the mass media has an important role to play in the promotion of public health and nutrition. It can bring to many people in a very short time, information necessary for health change, although

having such information alone may not actually lead to the desired objectives. Mass media is the most expeditious means to inform the people when a serious threat to health arises.

However, amidst the excitement over the use of mass media in the promotion of public health and nutrition, we must also balance carefully its potential benefits against the constraints in its usage.

How much do we know about the way mass media influence people? How can we account for the apparent success or failure of media information campaigns? Although the 'common sense' view is that mass media can produce change through persuasion, we must realise that audiences make their own selection and interpretation of messages and thus they may not necessarily be influenced or persuaded by the mass media.

Another constraint is its "mass" nature. Because of this "mass" nature, we have no control over determination of audience. Messages intended for certain target groups also reach other audiences and hence can be counter-productive in its intentions.

We must also consider the inherent difference in the use of the mass media for health promotion as opposed to commercial product advertising. It may be argued that promotion of commercial products through the mass media, especially the television, work so well that it must likewise work effectively for the promotion of health. The important difference is that commercial advertising is directed at things which people want to do, such as keeping up with fashion. Health promotion is, however, trying to persuade people either not to do things they enjoy doing, eg smoking, or to do things that they do not particularly want to do, eg doing regular exercises. In commercial advertising, the 'product' can be dressed up, or the packaging can be changed at will. In health promotions, the 'product' cannot be packaged at will, nor can it be sold with certainty. Also in most countries, the budget available for health promotion is small compared with that for commercial advertising campaigns.

The mass media itself may at times be responsible for the limited impact on health promotion. For example, while a television programme may attempt to persuade us about the social and personal dangers of alcohol abuse, numerous television

advertisements and programmes persuade us that alcohol is associated with sophisticated lifestyles and that your status in society is dubious if you do not provide certain well-known brands of whisky or brandy etc when you are entertaining. Which is more likely to have more impact in a status-conscious society?

An important contribution towards the successful use of mass media to promote public health and nutrition comes from the media producer. Producers have the power to determine which issues will be reported, the ways in which they will be reported, and the nature of public discussion that will follow from their reporting. There must be close collaboration between the health authorities and the media producers to determine how the media can be best used at lowest possible cost in the cause of health promotion. Collaboration is also important to meet the seven Cs for mass media effectiveness, ie credibility, context, content, clarity, continuity, channels and capability.

Hence, during this three-day Round Table on "Mass Media and the Promotion of Public Health and Nutrition in ASEAN", I sincerely hope that you will look into the understanding of the process by which people respond to health issues over the mass media and

the possible forms of collaboration between health authorities and media producers.

I wish you a fruitful discussion.

Thank you.