

## Health Communication: Issues and Challenges

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### Abstract

Health communication, in the contemporary times, has assumed great significance than ever before. It is not only undergoing fast developments but integrates both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary efforts to widen its nature and scope, applicability and dynamic nature. Its purpose is to promote wellness and healthy behaviours among masses in general. Believed to be one of the fastest growing areas of communication, health communication needs to strengthen its efforts and approaches to devise and improve its desired outcomes. The huge technological advancements can play an effective and engaging role in devising health communication strategies, health advocacy campaigns, health literacy and education programmes and other related content for all so that the objectives of achieving ‘*sound health for all*’ does not remain elusive. Focused and sustained efforts and campaigns are required to make health communication messages comprehensible and result-oriented using different communication channels and diverse media platforms.

**Key Words:** Health literacy, health communication strategies, health education and awareness, well-being, advocacy campaigns

### Health Communication: Concept, Definition and Overview

Health Communication, over the past many years, has gained wide momentum due to its applicability and acceptance. It has grabbed worldwide attention from diverse fields especially after COVID-19 outbreak in December 2019 that caused huge impact on the lives and livelihood of people across the globe. Age-old mantras such as “health comes first”, “sound mind lies in a sound body” and “health is wealth” are deeply ingrained within individual psyches at the community level. Interventions in terms of sensitization, trainings, campaigns and advocacy plans, are all part of health communication strategies where multiple channels of communication and media platforms can be used to achieve the desired results in terms of healthy well being of any society.

Health Communication comprises of two words ‘health’ and ‘communication’. It means communicating health values using effective means of communication to generate collective consensus among masses (Nishiuchi, Taguri & Ishikawa, 2016). It mainly initiates a positive and healthy dialogue between health professionals, communication experts, media professionals,

government officials and general masses with the purpose to generate awareness and sensitization on health education, health awareness, health literacy and healthy life. Focus in health communication mainly revolves around health related information and this information has to be easily accessible, comprehensible, direct and specific. It can take place at multiple levels and emphasize on holistic approach to health promotion.

Health communication is defined as a study or use of communication techniques to improve the health sector (Mheidly & Fares, 2020). Society for Health Communication (2017) defines health communication as the science and art of using communication to advance the health and well-being of people and populations. It is a multidisciplinary field of study and practice that applies communication evidence, strategy, theory and creativity to promote policies, practices and behaviours of people. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000) defines health communication as the art and technique of informing, influencing and motivating individuals, institutional and public audiences about important health issues. The scope of health communication includes disease prevention, health promotion, health care policy, and the business of health care as well as enhancement of the quality of life and health of individuals within the community (Feeley & Chen, 2013).

Although similar communication strategies had been in practice informally for years, the term 'health communication' was officially used for the first time in 1975 by the International Communication Association. In 1997, the American Public Health Association recognized health communication as a discipline within the broader fields of public health education and health promotion. Since then, number of initiatives has taken place that has assisted in shaping, developing and advancing the field. Health communication has developed as a vibrant and important field of study concerned with the powerful roles performed by human and mediated communication in health care delivery and health promotion (Kreps, Bonaguro & Query, 1998). When World Health Organization (WHO) was created after the Second World War, people faced innumerable and serious health issues. The life expectancy was low and there was dearth of health care workers and professionals. Diseases like smallpox and polio were major threats and malaria was widespread. Hunger, nutritional deficiencies and poor access to safe water and sanitation were equally important public health issues that humanity was faced with. Later, several health initiatives, innovations and investments were made to respond to these health issues and concerns.

## **Health Communication Strategies and Challenges**

The key strategy about health communication is to keep public informed and updated about various health issues and challenges confronting the society. Role of health experts, health educators, health practitioners, scientists, governments, media and non-government organizations in this endeavour remains imperative. The primary purpose of health communication is to disseminate information and knowledge about health issues using multiple health communication channels and strategies. As part of that strategy health messages are framed, target audience selected and the medium of message decided according to audience and geographical situations.

Generally, four approaches have been adopted in health communication strategies and those are information, education, persuasive and prompting (Sharma, Nahak & Kanozia, 2019).

Disseminating health related messages to people is very critical. Health communication ensures that pertinent and specific information reaches the relevant quarters. Even if there are diverse sources of health information, medium and channels of communication ought to be diversified and streamlined to cater to the health needs and information of the people. Apart from various communication channels, media too can play a powerful role in this direction. Ikems (2020) however, observed that media is constrained by presentation style, kind of stories they choose to make public, frames and interpretation given to health stories and media ownership and control pattern. It was as such suggested to shift the focus towards studying people-centric stories and explore if health reports were given due media coverage.

As health communication examines how the use of different communication strategies can keep people informed about their health and influence their behaviour, its mode and messages have to be relevant, specific, accurate, unbiased, comprehensible, target-oriented, easily accessible and actionable. It should mainly focus on educating masses on health issues, create sensitization in the form of health education and health literacy and promote healthcare plans, policies and practices that would lead towards health advocacy and health campaigns seeking to address broad public health issues.

Servaes and Patchanee (2010) observed that there is no single strategic communication response to health-related challenges. Right and relevant type of advocacy strategy is to be identified and adopted. Communication strategies have moved from an overwhelming focus on behavior change communication to addressing policy issues through advocacy communication and citizen involvement through participatory communication measures and mechanisms. Advocacy combines social networking and mobilization, interpersonal communication and negotiation, as well as the use of media for generating desired public response. Communication that understands audience, their needs and drivers of their behaviours and the communication that is credible, timely, accessible and actionable can improve public perceptions, their level of awareness and bring respective changes in their attitude, behaviours and wellbeing.

## **Role of Media in Health Communication**

Media is a powerful tool for dissemination of wellness education. It serves as a portal for communication between health institutions, government and public. Different media channels become windows through which the public looks for accurate information, credible facts, government plans, policies and decisions and public response. Media contributes to health awareness and promotion, making it an essential mediator for health communication. It plays an important role in influencing health behaviour. Media through its various forms and portals can play a vital role in raising social awareness, increasing exposure to truthful information, promoting healthy habits and improving psychological well-being (Mheidly & Fares, 2020). Media's effectiveness in health communication lies in strong written, verbal and visual

communication strategies that can impact public views and perceptions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Pertinent to mention here, mass media became a major source of information about COVID-19, its cause of spread and preventive measures, immediately after its outbreak. It played a major role in tracking the contagious disease and providing timely updates that enabled a rapid and widespread reach of public health communication. Media reinforced illness-preventing guidelines daily and people were encouraged to use tele-health to meet their healthcare needs. Mass media has an imperative role in today's world and it can provide a unified platform for all public health communications, comprehensive healthcare education guidelines and robust social distancing strategies while still maintaining social connections. It can enable equal access to healthcare, end discrimination, and social stigmatization. The role of media and public health communications must be understood and explored further as they will be an essential tool for combating any outbreak (Anwar et-al, 2020). Media is extremely powerful in promoting health beliefs and in creating role models for people. The ways in which health is defined or understood can have wide-ranging implications and can have an impact on issues such as health promotion or health literacy. Health presentation in the media has a significant social impact because this type of message is important in changing beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of public relating to health and in promoting health-related knowledge among the target audience (Marinescu and Mitu, 2016).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the advance of information communication technology, including the widespread mobile devices and social media, has been changing the quality of life across the globe. Internet penetration can help in communicating information and messages across geographic boundaries and time. The emergence of social media has made medical and health information more transparent and at the same time, medical and health organizations are expected to react in a faster mode. It has been trend for local governments to promote health information and campaign by means of social media. Mass media including the new media now transmit messages with high efficacy through advertising, entertainment, public relations and social experience (Fung & Lau, 2020).

As such it can be said that media can provide a dynamic and interactive platform for health communication specific messages, information and other content to be disseminated far and wide with the objective to promote overall public good and well being.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Some of the theories have been discussed here to provide a broader context and understanding of the concept and to decipher the ways things related to health communication are:

### **Health Belief Model**

Becker (1974) developed the Health Belief Model (HBM) that could be used as a pattern to evaluate or influence individual behavioural change. It proposes that a person's behaviour can be predicted based on how vulnerable the individual considers themselves to be. 'Vulnerability' in the model is expressed through risk (perceived susceptibility) and seriousness of consequences (severity). These two vulnerability variables need to be considered before a decision can take place. For example, this could include how 'susceptible' individuals feel they are to contract an illness. A person's decision to perform the health-promoting (or damaging) behaviour will be based on the outcome of this 'weighing up' process.

The model is based on four factors that need to take place for a behaviour change to occur. Those are: The person needs to have an 'incentive' to change their behaviour, the person must feel there is a 'risk' of continuing the current behaviour, the person must believe change will have 'benefits', and these need to outweigh the 'barriers'. The HBM model also considers 'modifying factors' essential for a behaviour change and those are demographic variables, socio-psychological variables and structural variables that influence how a person perceives the disease severity, threats and susceptibility. Factors such as age, gender, peer pressure or prior contact with the disease also impacts the decision-making process.

### Transtheoretical Model (Stages of Change Model)

Transtheoretical model also referred to as 'Stages of Change' model is a cyclic model developed by Prochaska and Diclemente (1983). The model suggests that people change their behaviour at certain stages in life and during these stages they consider whether or not to make changes to their behaviours.



This cyclic model passes through a series of stages from precontemplation (not ready to change) to contemplation (thinking of change), to preparation (getting ready to change), to action (performing the change), to maintenance (continuing the change) and to relapse (abandoning changes and reverting to former behaviours).

### Process of Behaviour Change

This model recognizes communication as a process where people can move between the stages. Different messages are sought depending on where the person is on the Process of Behaviour Change framework. The main difference between this model and transtheoretical model is that the model is not seen as circular, but as a series of 'steps' where a person moves upwards towards the final goal. The model includes the following steps:

- **Preknowledge:** At this stage a person is unaware of any risks or problems associated with their behaviour.
- **Knowledgeable:** Here a person is aware of the problem and risks attached to their behaviour.
- **Approving:** This is when a person supports change in his/her behavior.
- **Intending:** When a person intends to take action to change his/her behavior.
- **Practicing:** Here the intended behaviour is being practiced.
- **Advocating:** The new behaviour is being implemented and carried forward to others as well.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Communication that is designed and developed to address information needs related to health and other associated issues is commonly referred to as health communication. Over the past many years, health communication has gained wider momentum and after the outbreak of contagious COVID-19 the concept became all the more significant. It is the coordinated and collaborative effort of health and communication experts, health practitioners, government officials, media professionals to devise and design health related content for the public at large so that they stay informed and connected with officials, media and experts on the issues concerning their health. Successful launch of any health related programme or policy or expecting any behaviour change or encountering any epidemic is not possible without health communication.

To achieve effective health communication, certain strategies need to be formulated to influence and empower individuals, societies and communities to make healthier and informed choices. Health communication also integrates components of multiple theories and models to promote constructive changes in the life and well being of individuals and societies. While designing health communication strategies and media interventions or health campaigns it is essential to consider the overall goals and objectives of such interventions. Besides, health communication messages have to be tailored to address the specific needs of the audience and content created has to be target-specific. Furthermore, multiple communication channels and strategies, diverse media platforms and access and availability of these channels and platforms have to be ensured to reach wider audiences.

To achieve maximum benefits of health communication; media content, reportage, advocacy and campaigns should be prepared judiciously because they inform, educate and influence masses. Consequently, health related news, information and messages need to be creatively and carefully designed and disseminated. Certain sensitive health issues need to be dealt with extreme care and

caution. Privacy needs to be maintained and encouraged. No scope should be left for misinformation on health issues. Health emergencies should be honestly and responsibly reported. Digital interventions and Social Media can prove of great help in designing, promoting and disseminating health communication messages, initiatives, programmes and narratives.

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