Communication in Public Health

PHC 6102
Principles of Health Policy and Management
Objectives

• Understand the principles of effective communication in public health management
• Identify various communication channels for public health
• Identify the role of health literacy in improving health outcomes
• Describe how information technology can enable public health communication
• Explain communicating to target audiences
• Summarize risk communication strategies
Communication: Essential Skill

- Required for developing and managing successful public health activities
- Must employ explicit communication strategies to manage relationships with the media, policy makers, and the public
- Identified as one of the 28 focus areas for Healthy People 2010

Intended Outcomes of Communication

- Increased service utilization
- Healthier lifestyles
- Improved organizational performance
- Strengthened community partnerships
- Supportive health policies
- Effective management of public health emergencies
Principles of Effective Communication

• Several key principles of communication that are particularly relevant to public health practice:
  – Keep messages and language simple
  – Ensure cultural competency
  – Strike while the iron is hot
  – Use multiple communication channels
Culturally Competent Communication

• The IOM’s “The Future of the Public’s Health in the 21st Century”

• Purnell model of cultural competence
  – Communication (e.g., primary language and dialect, verbal and non-verbal communication, willingness to share feelings, )
  – Family roles and organization (e.g., gender roles and roles of family members)
  – Nutrition (e.g., having adequate food, the meaning of food; food rituals and taboos

Channels of Communication

• Channels of communication (media) define the route or method by which communication occurs.

• Appropriate channel depends both on content and audience.

• Many channels of communication:
  – Writing (poster, press release, newsletter, manuscript)
  – Verbal (news conference, radio interview, conference call, or telephone “robo-calls”)
  – Internet-based technology (web, email, social media)
Channels to Receive Info

• Channels can be used to receive and gather information
  – Town halls
  – Advisory groups
  – Focus groups
  – Complaints or Customer satisfaction surveys
  – Health care provider notifications

• Receiving useful information from a number of sources is often as critical as sending information
Information Technology
Communication Platforms

- Email
- Web portal
  - CDC’s Epidemic Information Exchange
- Social Media
  - Facebook, Twitter, Flickr
- Public Health Information Network
  - Technology standards for public health information exchange
Health Literacy

• A leading barrier to effective health communication

• Consistent findings of association between low health literacy and poor health outcomes

• Healthy People 2010’s definition:
  – “The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate decisions.”

Health Literacy Problem

• 2004 IOM report stated that 90 million of U.S. adults are unable to read complex texts, including many health-related materials

• Causes:
  – Language & cultural variation
  – Technological complexity in health care
  – Intricate administrative documents and requirements

"A Prescription to End Confusion"

- Whose responsibility?
  - Health care providers, public health, schools, consumers & media

- Goals?
  - Improve quality of life
  - Reduce disparities in health outcomes
  - Reduce health care costs in U.S.

- Methods?
  - Develop uniform standards for addressing health literacy, communicate at appropriate level for audience, incorporate health knowledge into primary schools

Target Audiences

• Customize communication strategies to smaller subgroups (i.e., audience segments) of a larger population

• Audiences tend to vary by factors
  – Race/ethnicity
  – Socioeconomic status
  – Age
  – Educational level
Target Audience Examples

• Health care providers
• Women of childbearing age
• Older adults
• Individuals with disabilities
• Monolingual individuals
• Policy makers
• Other public health practitioners
• Media
Targeted Communication Example

• Tobacco prevention campaign by the Arizona Department of Health Services
  – Held focus groups with adolescents
  – Goal: potentially effective media messages targeted at teens

• Created new slogan for campaign
  – “Tobacco: tumor-causing, teeth staining, smelly, puking, habit.”
  – Result: 96% of teenagers statewide remembered the campaign slogan

CDC: Zombie Apocalypse

Get A Kit
Make A Plan
Be Prepared

emergency.cdc.gov
Community Meetings

- Develop clear objectives for a specific target audience
- Notify target audiences
- Prepare meeting site
- Use a carefully planned agenda
- Clarify meeting ground rules
- Follow through after a meeting with results and feedback
Media Relations

• Press releases
  – A good resource: University of Kansas’s [Community Tool Box](#)

• Press conferences

• Media Interaction
  – Be complete and accurate
  – Be prepared
  – Be prompt
  – Be confident
Communicating with Policy Makers

• Simplify your message
• Communicate your agency’s agenda often
• Use phone calls, personal visits, newsletters, email updates, ceremonies
• Attend important events that have public health ramifications
• Provide reports of how citizen complaints have been handled
• Put a personal face on issues
Risk Communication During Public Health Emergencies Continued

• Execute a solid communication plan
• Be the first source of information with a simple message
• Express empathy clearly
• Demonstrate competence and expertise
• Remain honest and open
National Public Health Information Coalition

• Network of public affairs officials (i.e., director of communications)
  – Bi-weekly conference calls with the CDC
  – Annual conferences
  – “The Media and You” survival guide

• Resources
  – Press releases templates
  – Model emergency communications plans
  – Model targeted communications
Risk Communication During Public Health Emergencies

• Useful guides that explore this field in greater depth:
  – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) “Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication by Leaders for Leaders.”

Questions

1. Name six categories of intended outcomes of effective public health communications.
2. Explain why timing is important in effective public health communications.
3. Describe your preferred channel of communication for receiving public health information. Explain why this is effective for your “type” of targeted audience.
4. What is the leading barrier to effective health communication?
5. Explain how you would handle an interaction with a reporter interviewing you about an infectious disease outbreak.