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The role of the communication in changing health behaviors

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Abstract: *The communication in the field of health can be defined as a communication strategy used to inform and influence individual and community decisions with the aim of improving and enriching personal and community behaviors and public health practices. It includes studying public health attitudes and behaviours to determine the type, frequency and format of the messages.*

Keywords: *attitudes, behavior, change, communication, health*

Social communication and behavioral change are at the heart of any successful public health initiative. The purpose of communication is to make someone to think in a certain way, to do something or to act, in other words is the exchange of emotions, ideas and opinions in the form of information between sender and receiver [1]. It is the most important aspect of the educational process aimed at changing behaviour and attitude and improving the level of knowledge [2].

The communication has several functions [3]:
- instrumental function – to achieve something;
- information function – to find out or explain something;
- social contact function – to make a pleasant environment;
- control function – to cause someone to behave in a certain way;
- expression function – to express feelings or to present themselves in a certain way;
- role-related function – for the given situation;
- educational function – to convey knowledge;
- stimulation function– to bring interest;
- entertainment function – to provide leisure activity;
- cultural promotion function – to strengthen cultural rites.

According to John Fiske-1982, [4] there are two complementary schools with different approaches, in the study of the communication, the school "process" (communication as a transmission of messages; communication analysis models: Lasswell - 1948, Shannon and Weaver - 1949, Newcomb - 1953, Gerbner - 1956, Westley and MacLean - 1957, Jakobson - 1960, etc.) and the semiotian school (communication as production and exchange of meanings; founders and contributors: Charles S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure , as well as C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, Louis Trolle Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes, Pierre Gouriaud); There are many schemes of the communication process, but the most complete belongs to Philip Kotler, who managed to integrate all the elements of the process, as can be seen in the Figure 1.

The Healthy People 2010 Report defines the communication in public health as "the art and technique of informing, influencing and motivating individuals, institutions, general public on the important public health issues [6].

The term health communications was first used in 1961, when the U.S. National Health Council held a National Health Forum to discuss the challenges facing health intelligence communications [7]. The term was used again in 1962, when the surgeon Luther Terry organized a conference on health

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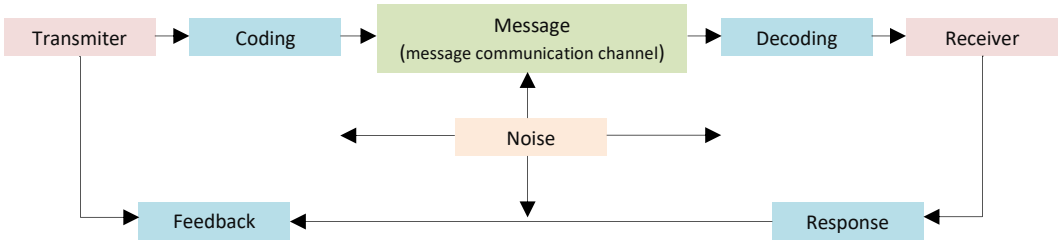
communications to discuss how different communication techniques can be used to make health information available to the public [8]. The term was adopted by members of an interest group at the International Communication Association (ICA) in 1975 [9].

Figure 1: Kotler's model.



Source: Adaptation by Kotler, Ph., Principles of Marketing, III. Developing the Marketing Mix. 13. Integrated Marketing Communication Strategy, Pearson, Canada, pag. 546, accesibil online la: http://www.pearsoned.ca/highered/divisions/virtual_tours/kotler/kotler_ch13.pdf [5]

Health communication is a hybrid field that derives from communication, marketing, journalism and public relations studies and overlaps with health education and health promotion [10].

The health education is used to make people aware of the patterns of healthy behavior and its importance. The health education programmes related to behavioral change are considered to be a pillar of medical activity [11].

The health education is a social science that relies on medical, biological, physical, environmental and psychological sciences to prevent the occurrence of the diseases and promote health through behavior-changing activities based on the education.

Health campaigns for the prevention of the communicable diseases, for the promotion of maternal and child health, for the promotion of the immunisation, for education about family planning methods and other preventive health services have a long history [12].

The health education is linked to changes in people's feelings, knowledge and behaviour. It is the process carried out by actively involving people who aim to initiate healthy behavior and to know the prejudices and practices of people who are discouraged towards health in order to achieve the health goal [13].

The health communication is an extensive area that includes health education, risk communication, health and policy promotion, focus communication, patient and supplier communication and health literacy. Health communication strategies enable to the doctors and nurses, community health centres, hospitals and hospital administrators, nursing homes, health educators, non-profit organisations, government agencies and others to disseminate information that can positively influence personal health behaviors and choices.

Using informed marketing tactics and sociological data to lead to decision-making, the health communication is used to promote health campaigns in order to influence and educate the public on health issues [14].

The success of the health communication or health education programmes depends on people's interest. It is important for them to be actively involved, the change cannot be imposed, people must be motivated to adopt healthy behavior [15].

Communication related to the behavior change can take different forms, to appeal at the individual or group level, in order to change behavior towards a specific health problem. Health communication includes interpersonal communications, such as individual meetings between a healthcare provider and the patient [16], as well as community-focused communications such as public meetings, advertisements in local newspapers, the distribution of brochures and leaflets or educational events.

The media plays a key role in health communication, serving as a channel of health information from the government and specialized health organizations to the public. With their extensive coverage through radio and television commercials, the media can persuade the general public to adopt new healthy behaviors and recall information on preventive health care, disease prevention and treatment, immunizations and more.

The Internet is now disseminating information on an unprecedented scale, but at the same time, false and unsafe information has become more common than ever, posing risks to the health of uninformed users. This situation can cause an unjustified panic among those who receive the messages and can be a problem as technology continues to move forward. Therefore, public health providers must communicate the risks to the public in a responsible and transparent way and identify and eliminate misleading notions [17].

The decision to choose a particular communication channel must be based first on the research of the target audience and then on its usefulness and coverage. Thus, some technologies are not particularly effective when used by a small number of people or are too complicated to be operated by ordinary people.

Health communication issues have become a major topic of large-scale research programs sponsored by various foundations, health care corporations and government agencies.

Communication to change behavior is based on research and involves interaction with individuals and communities and personalizes messages that meet the needs of a particular target audience. Messages are then disseminated through different communication channels to bring about behavioral changes in specific problems and achieve the desired positive results.

The message must have an impact and it should disseminate appropriate health content defined by [6] :

- accuracy (the content is valid and without errors of interpretation or judgment);

- availability (the content must be placed where the public can access it);

- balance (to present both the benefits and risks of potential actions);

- consistency (remains consistent over time and it is consistent with information from another source);

- cultural competence (it must take into account ethnic, educational, linguistic issues); - relevant scientific evidence;

- coverage (to be available to the largest possible number of people in the target population);

- reliability (the source of the content is credible and the content is up-to-date);

- repetition (the delivery of the message must be continuous and repeated over time).

The development and management of social and behavioral change programmes involves the building of the partnerships at the national and local level, using new technologies and techniques of social and behavioral change and the incorporating of the social and behavioural change activities into programming the provision of services.

The utilisation of the new communication technologies for processing and dissemination of the health information has given rise to a new field, called health informatics. As information technologies advance, there are a variety of the new tools and information media for disseminating and accessing health information.

The access to relevant and in useful time at health information can help consumers participate in decision-making and encourage cooperation and collaboration between providers and consumers.

The health communication can help solve ways in which consumers and providers can most profitably inform themselves about relevant health problems, identify the best ways to develop and present high-quality health information to the target audience, and encourage decision-making in modern efforts to adopt healthy behaviors.

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