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Keynote speech title: Challenges and opportunities in communicating Complex Health Messages

## **Challenges and opportunities in communicating Complex Health Messages**

It is a great pleasure to be part of the European Health Literacy Conference. I was invited here to share my thoughts with the health literacy community about the complexity of and associated challenges and opportunities in communicating effectively about health.

Health communication is the design, dissemination, and evaluation of messages communicated to and from intended audiences to advance the health of the public. As such, health communication has an essential role in promoting healthy choices, providing health care, and creating better understanding of health policy issues. Thus, the work you all do in health literacy matters, or certainly it should, as it helps us to understand the way in which messages are received, understood, accepted, and acted upon. Health communication stands on the edge of a new age, driven by the consequences associated with health, the inherent complexities in humans and health, and emerging advances in ICT.

### *Importance*

Although health communication is a relatively new field of study and research, it is the ubiquitous thread that bridges the gap between health knowledge, research evidence and the particular needs of the public, policymakers, and health care providers. In many cases, it requires cross disciplinary, multiparty, geographically, and linguistically dispersed collaborative efforts. It functions in an environment where literacy levels along with trust in institutions, including medical and health, has declined so much that life saving medical knowledge and practices, such as vaccinations, are depicted as another political-social debate that threatens to infect or otherwise enslave humanity.

It boggles the mind that we find ourselves in this position at this point in history: where large enough numbers of people believe that medical interventions designed to prevent disease and illness are actually being used to substitute alternative diseases and illnesses. These kinds of misunderstandings represent a serious threat to the health and well being of nearly everyone.

While there is no substitute for good health policy, the profound need for effective health communication reinforces the need for continual improvements in understanding the mechanisms and processes that comprise it as well as the factors that influence associated health outcomes.

## **Background**

### Complexity

There are a number of barriers to effective health communication, but perhaps complexity stands out as the greatest obstacle.

First, the health sector is enormous and fragmented. It encompasses a wide spectrum of services, products and activities from cradle to grave. And health involves multiple actors with sometimes competing, or at least inconsistent, interests.

Second, many health topics are undeniably technical as they involve tools and equipment that are able to reach into the genetic fabric of life.

Moreover, so much of communication in health revolves around unique and hard to pronounce terminology, such as cardio infarction and pediatric cardiomyopathy. Now, whether the general public know what these words mean is another example of the complexity health imposes on communicating about it.

Third, health matters are often inherently complex and individuals need to process fast-changing and sometimes seemingly contradictory scientific evidence. And, as our knowledge and understanding of diseases and their causes changes with developments in science, messages need to keep pace. This influences confidence in messages and messengers about health.

Forth, health is deeply entwined with individual choice and behaviors coupled with the interactive effects of social and environmental factors. In some ways, this characteristic is exemplified by the intention-behavior gap found in many health behavior studies. Essentially, many studies find that people intend to change a behavior (increase their physical activity, eat better, stop smoking, take their meds as prescribed) but they don't follow through.

### (over)Simplification

Another barrier to effective communication results from the natural desire to counteract complexity by simplifying messages, and this requires skill and appropriate techniques. Too often, in an effort to simplify complex messages, messages are oversimplified.

The oversimplification of information, knowledge, or research evidence generates misunderstandings, misperceptions, and lack of sufficient information to that can reasonably serve as the basis for behavior. And when we get it wrong or incomplete, people can be harmed and certainly, people remember and lose confidence.

Oversimplification of communication is not much more useful than telling a smoker who wishes to

quit to simply “Stop smoking”. Or perhaps worse is to communicate that you should just “wash your hands with soap” when soap or clean water are limited commodities. This has essentially been the approach used for many years and hasn't quite work out very well.

In addition to oversimplifying messages, too often, health communication simplifies people and their behaviors. Health is complex. People are complex. Behavior is complex. I do not mean to say that it's too complicated, but rather, that human behavior is often determined by much more than willpower, motivation or an inspirational message – *even when the message is conveyed 7 or more times.*

Communication about health must be designed with evidence about the health situation, understanding the population characteristics and setting, evidence about communicating this topic, high standards of ethics, and as part of a larger ecological strategic social marketing program for health improvement. I recommend social marketing, as it tends to have better outcomes on individual, community, health system and policy outcomes than communication alone. And it is the recommended strategy in several European and WHO policy reports.

### Big data

Just as communication needs to get more personally relevant, intuitive, and effective, data are becoming more personal, more vast and more available. Just as many are becoming comfortable with the Web 2.0 world, signified by Facebook and twitter, the Web 3.0 or the 'web of everything' looms over the horizon and promises a massive expansion of the big data universe.

For example, current physical activity monitoring apps, watches and gadgets will be greatly surpassed as data collection instruments and processes evolve. While this thoroughly excites techies and many studying and practicing health literacy, health behavior and health communication, it remains to be seen how new data sources can be used effectively and efficiently in health communication. While there is and will be huge amounts of data that could inform communication, great challenges exist: much of the data that will be available is because it *can be collected* as opposed to data that *should be collected*, not to mention challenges and concerns about data archiving, privacy, and distribution for research purposes.

Fundamentally, the development and implementation of health communication must be informed by data, but data in and of itself does not constitute communication that serves as a catalyst for behavior change. Effective communication design and delivery requires capacity and capability of trained workers, reliance on the evidence base, and working within the larger environment in which health takes place.

To build confidence in Health Communication, we need to do things better and in doing so, we must consider the health literacy of all those who should benefit from health communication research and practice.

## Research

One thing we can do better is for health communication and health literacy researchers to be more attentive to the practical issues related to the transferability of your research into practice and policy. This is an issue of growing importance as the volume of research on health communication and health literacy has grown in Europe and around the globe. In particular, during our work on a policy report about Communicating Complex Messages for the World Innovation Summit for Health (you all have a copy...) we recognized the importance of health literacy as a strategic planning consideration in developing health messages, yet it was difficult to incorporate specific evidence based guidelines into the work.

The amount of health research output is vast and grows every year. Obviously - it is pretty much impossible to stay on top of everything that is being published. If you can help translate your work it would go a long way to uptake and improvement in health outcomes. We need to remember that the vast majority of health communication is being done by local and national authorities (DoHs) and governments; not your research groups.

So, it is time to move beyond reporting in your papers *"this research has important implications for practice and policy"* to providing concrete, specific examples of how it can be useful, and implemented into policy and practice.

At the end of the day, one of the greatest contributions of knowledge is the ability to extend theoretical development and testing into practical, pragmatic applications.

Another example of increasing confidence in health communication is through engagement.

As trust in traditional sources of information is declining, those who convey and seek health messages must navigate their way through an increasingly fragmented media, often in a heavily politicized context. Thus, a viable approach to building confidence in health communication uses various activities to promote public understanding of health. You all might call this "health literacy"

Mainstream media has effects on influencing the public agenda, framing, and to some extent public knowledge. New media and social media offer new channels to disseminate information about health unencumbered by the simplistic, sensationalistic transformations caused by journalistic norms and practices.

Public engagement offers many opportunities in terms of fostering an environment of greater openness and transparency about health and designing communication that works better...but engaging with the public and the media requires training and careful planning.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that health communication effectiveness is partially dependent on the extent that it has earned the confidence of those who use and rely on it.

### Practice guidelines

While the health challenges we face are great, we have more tools and more knowledge at our fingertips than ever before. In response to the challenges, many frameworks for communication have been proposed. Most are about the creation of programs and the one we developed during our work at the World Innovation Summit for Health aims to guide the actual message design.

The ADD framework lays out process steps and key questions that guide the health communicator in producing coherent, understandable and effective messages. It aims to be scalable to all sizes of problems, budgets, and target populations, and generalizable to most health issues. It helps a message develop answer the critical questions any communication must address.

- What is this message trying to accomplish? Why should this message be said? What should be said? How should it be said? Where should it be said? To whom should it be said? Who should say it? How many times should it be said?
- How could this message be mis-understood?

A sustainable benefit of the ADD framework is the electronic knowledge exchange platform that collects and shares evidence about health communication development and effects. You can read more about the framework in the report on Communicating complex health messages (in your set/bag) or online at the WISH website or at [ADD4HComm.info](http://ADD4HComm.info).

### **Conclusion**

Communicating health messages effectively is not an easy task. Further, data from around Europe and the world demonstrate that health literacy is low, not only for vulnerable groups but for the general population and society as a whole. While long-term solutions to this challenge are likely to lie in improving access to quality education, health communicators need to take account of literacy when designing and delivering their messages.

Whether we want to maintain and improve health, contain immediate public health crises or respond appropriately to ill health, the messages we send and receive are critical to creating better health for us all.

Despite many challenges and apparent problems that exist, including health literacy, moving forward we know one thing for sure – nearly everyone seeks good health - and that is the one thing we have in common that makes me optimistic.

After all, while health is complex, the communication about health should not be.