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Communicating Complex Health Messages

I) Introduction

Health comm is the design, dissemination, and evaluation of messages communicated to and from intended audiences to advance the health of the public. As such, health comm has an essential role in promoting healthy choices, providing health care, and creating better understanding of health policy issues. Thus, it is imperative that comm about health be effective.

Good health, or the hope of good health, is one of the few values shared universally by people across the globe and throughout history. But since WWII health has taken on much more importance economically and politically. And, as we've seen with ebola, sars, bse, measles and others, health can also be a matter of the security of communities and nations.

People want good health and health is one of the criteria used when assessing great political leadership. For example, in his outline for post war Britain, Winston Churchill proposed a national health program. In his speech he stated that **Healthy citizens are the greatest asset any country can have**. He was voted the Greatest Briton of all time in a 2002 BBC poll. Admittedly Churchill did much to merit his place in history.

However, another example reinforces the enduring impact of health on public opinion. This one from Canada in the 1960s. Tommy Douglas was leader of a national political party that never placed higher than 3rd in elections, and took some very unpopular stands. Tommy Douglas dedicated his political career to promoting universal health care, which was adopted in 1972. He was voted the greatest person in Canadian history in 2004 CBC poll.

These two examples, and others from across the world, vividly illustrate that the public values and prioritizes health and good health policy stands out as a monument that lasts throughout history.

So, we value health. And we need to communicate about health. But, the communication about health tends to be complicated. It is often difficult to act upon and is sometimes even harmful. Let me say, as a health communicator and social marketer with a background in both business and academia, we should not be content with the current state of health communication. We need to do better. We can do better.

While there are examples of effective communication, research indicates that health communication is at best, only marginally effective, and sometimes counterproductive. For example, it is estimated that patients retain only about 20% of the information provided by doctors. What is remarkable and somewhat scary at the same time is that doctor-patient communication is generally considered to be the gold standard in health communication.

Let me say again, we can do better.

Thus, the question naturally arises -- what causes health communication to fall short of our

expectations and needs?

II) Complexity - Explanation for Limited Effectiveness of Health Communication

There are a number of explanations for the limitations of current health comm.

The science behind health is often technical. And the combination of education and low health literacy levels worldwide make it challenging to communicate complex health issues in a concise, comprehensible manner. Moreover, science evolves and so do the recommendations for health behaviors. Nutrition guidelines are a good example of this communication challenge.

To complicate matters further, Trust in traditional sources is declining, including doctors, celebrities, governments and the media. And the number of sources, channels and messengers of health messages is large, growing and is dynamic.

This fragmentation has led to the spread of contested health information such as beliefs about vaccination. Individuals are exposed to very different beliefs about vaccinations benefits or harms, coming from parents, celebrities and the media. Health matters are also often politicized so that ideology determines the level of trust in science. Vaccine is once again a good example as illustrated by the measles outbreak in the United States where possible presidential candidates expressed starkly different views about vaccination efficacy, individual and parental rights.

We need to do better. We can do better.

III) Proposed Solutions

So, what are we going to do about it?

The work of this forum, which involved input from health, behavior, policy, and communication experts working across the globe in policymaking and advising, academic research, business, media, and practice, resulted in the development of a primary recommendation and 3 related enablers that should result in more effective health comm.

First, The central recommendation of this Forum is to adopt an evidence-based framework for designing communication. This framework should help people clarify the capacity, function, and context when designing messages. We recommend the ADD framework that was developed during the research for this summit. The underlying guiding principle of the ADD framework reflects the vital importance of the individual and the context in which they live and work.

Health messages are received and processed through individual, social, political, environmental and behavioral filters that determine the messages people are exposed to, and how they interpret those messages. The complexity of health depends largely on the context in which people live. For example, hand washing or consuming a nutritious diet are rather simple behaviours to perform in some contexts while in others they are extremely difficult.

The framework provides a systematic approach to take account of context and incorporate best practices. It is relatively simple and adaptable for an extensive range of health contexts.

Three enablers ensure hcomm has the resources, priorities, and expertise needed for it to be successful.

- 1) Make funding of hcomm contingent on using an evidence-based framework. We recommend the ADD framework.
- 2) Appoint a senior level person in organizations whose role is to champion effective communication.
- 3) Provide improved training in health comm and media skills or both those who develop the messages as well as those who deliver them.

IV) Conclusion

While health communication is not a cure-all for all of the health problems we confront, it is hard to deny the importance of health communication. The ADD framework addresses the complexity challenges to effective health communication and we have built in a sharing step into our framework, supported by an online platform, for evidence gathering and sharing.

Let me emphasize the serious negative consequences resulting from ineffective health communication, such as policy misunderstandings and mistrust, the preventable spread of disease and illness, reduced quality of life and increased financial burden on individuals, communities and governments. We simply can't afford to waste resources on ineffective health communication.

If ever there was need for effective health communication - the need is here. If ever there was potential to produce effective health communication - the potential is here. If ever there was a time to seriously embrace innovative, accountable, evidence-based approaches to health communication - the time is now.

After all, **healthy citizens are a country's greatest asset.**

We need to do better. We can do better.