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Mobilizing media support for health

In order to stimulate the support of the mass media for the country’s programme of public information and education for health, Sri Lanka has launched a series of seminars for journalists. A survey of participants indicates that the objective is being achieved.

Although Sri Lanka has a high literacy rate, the country’s mass media have not made a significant contribution towards informing and motivating the public in health matters. Not long ago, health professionals were most reluctant to talk to representatives of the media, and even viewed with suspicion their presence in health institutions. Incorrect reporting, sensationalism, and the highlighting of inadequacies and deficiencies in health services, without a word of praise where it was due, had helped to create this distrust. The little coverage given to health education was poorly organized. There was no coordination between the efforts of public and private organizations disseminating information on health and allied fields. This often led to needless duplication of effort, conflicting information, and, in consequence, confusion in people’s mind.

Seminars

Against this background the Health Education Bureau of the Ministry of Health launched a series of seminars for media personnel on important health topics of interest to the general public, with the following aims.

- To mobilize the support of the mass media for the national programme of public information and education for health.
- To identify the role that the media could play in these areas.
- To stimulate media personnel and raise their interest in health, with a view to increasing their output on the subject.
- To prepare guidelines for establishing and strengthening the mechanisms available for the coordination of mutually supportive programmes of public information and education for health.
- To promote a dialogue and bring about closer cooperation between health professionals and journalists.

The participants were drawn from the different media and experts were invited to function as resource persons. Each seminar lasted half a day. Following registration, a brief inaugural ceremony was conducted in the presence of senior Ministry officials. This was important in drawing the support of the media. Short presentations were then

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given by three or four experts on different aspects of the topic covered. The experts were asked to design their contributions so as to meet the objectives of the seminars and the needs of the media personnel. An open discussion concluded the proceedings.

Evaluation

Since the commencement of the series in 1985, 16 seminars have been held at national level and three have been conducted at district level. The media personnel taking part numbered 114, and 58 experts, both medical and non-medical, served as resource persons. It is too early to make any assessment of impact; nevertheless, the views of 73 of the participants in the national seminars have been obtained by means of a postal questionnaire, mainly in order to facilitate strategy planning.

It was stated by 39.7% of the journalists that they have not previously been exposed to a similar activity conducted by any governmental or nongovernmental agency; in their professional capacity, 42.4% had contacted more than five of the experts since meeting them at the seminars, while 27.4% stated that at least one of the experts had contacted them on the same basis; 42.5% had had more than five feature articles, news reports or programmes on health published or broadcast subsequent to the seminars, and 78.1% felt that there had been an increase in their output of such items since their participation in the seminars; over 90% considered that the seminars were very useful or useful.

The findings clearly indicate that the seminars are of value in mobilizing mass media support for the stated purposes. It is also worth mentioning the valuable contribution being made by the medical profession. Quite a few medical officers, including consultants, are taking the lead in the efforts being made to enable the people at large to increase their level of health awareness.