The lessons of laughter

Arguing that humour is a powerful tool for promoting health care, the author presents the case for a lighthearted approach to health education.

Science has provided convincing evidence that laughter is good for your health. It has been shown that laughter decreases the amount of cortisol in the system, thus liberating interleukin-2 and other immune boosters that cortisol suppresses. It has also been determined that laughter increases the antibody in saliva that combats upper respiratory infection. Moreover, it is clear that laughter relaxes the muscles and relieves nervous tension.

Unfortunately, the positive role of laughter in health education has not yet been as carefully documented. There is even one school of thought that frowns on humorous approaches. My own conviction, based on almost thirty years’ experience, is that health is too serious a subject to be treated seriously. Humour is a powerful, even an indispensable, tool in promoting primary health care at the grass roots.

This was not an easy lesson for me to learn. Like many other highly trained medical professionals, I first approached my task with a great deal of earnestness and a touch of pomposity.

For example, in efforts to promote family planning, I tended to rely heavily on long-winded lectures full of technical terminology. In the Philippines, where many scientific concepts have no counterpart in local dialects, there was a tendency to resort to the Hispanic tradition for terms such as fertilización and ovulación.

This often led to misunderstanding and frustration. For example, there were unforeseen difficulties arising from the use of esperma for sperm, as it also means “candle” in some Philippine dialects. Thus, one day, I found myself facing a puzzled father-to-be, who told me, “I swear, Doctor, that my wife and I put out the candle before we went to bed”.

Another couple was having trouble with the term IUD—the abbreviation for intrauterine device. When I asked the wife what method of family planning she was using, she confided with some embarrassment, “they inserted an AID in my womb”. Of course, she had confused “IUD” with the more familiar abbreviation “AID”, for the Agency for International Development which administers the United States foreign aid programme.

Using analogies

For a long, long time, I grappled with the problem of making unfamiliar scientific concepts clear to rural villagers. Finally, an old village woman showed me that the
By analogy with papaya trees, Thai villagers learn about the importance of birth spacing. The original caption to this poster reads: “Trees when grown very close together give low quality of product. A woman also, if she gives birth too closely, will have weak, underweight babies.”

Villagers sometimes astonished us by the ingenuity with which they developed new analogies or refined old ones. Take the case of immunization.

It has generally been very difficult to win acceptance for the concept of immunization, for how can you defend the logic of a process in which healthy children are injected with a substance that often seems to make them ill? We had had success with an analogy comparing vaccination to a preliminary skirmish, which alerts a nation’s army to the presence of an enemy and gives them time to prepare for a major invasion.

We thought we had a good analogy, but it was made even better by the contribution of villagers who offered an explanation for the fever that sometimes results from vaccination. “This is the heat of battle”, they told us.

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solution was to use simple comparisons based on the villagers’ everyday experiences.

“When you were explaining family planning”, she told me, “I could not really follow what you said about ‘ovum’, ‘ovary’ and ‘uterus’, but your description reminded me of a string bean, whose seeds are pushed out and grown in fertile fields.”

I tested the use of such analogies in a subsequent talk with villagers, using a string bean to demonstrate the ovulation process. At one point in my demonstration, as I pressed on the pod to show how the seeds are extruded, two seeds came out at the same time. “Twins!” exclaimed one of the village women.

I knew we were on the right track. The villagers were participating, bringing in vegetables, coming up with new analogies. It was great fun. I was no longer lecturing. They were teaching me.

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I confess that initially I was made somewhat uneasy by the exuberant humour and whimsy in some of the responses from the villagers. In one discussion, we were using the example of the pomelo tree to make the point that limiting the size of families is critical to health and well-being. Farmers know that a pomelo tree can only sustain about 40 good-sized fruits. After the session, one of the farmers came to me to say that he had learned an important lesson. “I have four children”, he told me. “Now I am going to start work on producing another 36.”
On another occasion, we were attempting to clarify infertility problems by discussing the “smudging” process, in which farmers build a fire under a mango tree to create smoke which triggers fruiting. Following this session, a farmer came to me to announce plans to build a fire under his wife.

Vaccination is like a preliminary skirmish: it alerts a nation’s army to the presence of an enemy and gives them time to prepare for a major invasion.

However, I am no longer uneasy about responses like this, because I believe that they prove that we are succeeding in getting our messages across. It is impossible to make a joke about something unless you have understood it.

Intercultural adaptations

Over the years, my colleagues at the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) have worked with villagers to develop more than 600 analogies, mostly agricultural, to illustrate family planning and health concepts. The analogy system has been successfully adapted in countries throughout the Third World. The following are some of the analogies used in different countries.

- **Thailand.** Raising a family is like planting papaya trees. If the trees are planted too closely together the quality of the fruit will be poor.

- **Bangladesh.** The offspring of couples who marry too young are like the fruit of immature coconut trees.

- **India.** A large family is like an overcrowded bus, with people hanging from the roof and windows.

- **Kenya.** Calves that are weaned too soon forget their mothers completely; hence, it is best to continue breast-feeding for as long as possible.

Anecdotes and parables

In addition to the lighthearted analogies, there are some forms of humour, including anecdotes and parables, which I use to get our message across. To demonstrate the perils of ignorance for a family or for a community, I have sometimes told the following story about *Noli me tangere*, the major work of José Rizal, the great leader and martyr in the struggle for the Philippines’ independence from Spain:

A primary school teacher was quizzing her eight-year-old pupils about Philippine history.

“Pedro”, she asked, “who wrote *Noli me tangere*?”

Pedro, who had been daydreaming, answered with a start, “Not me”.

The teacher was incensed. She sent for Pedro’s father and told him what had happened.

“I have raised Pedro to be a good and honest boy”, the father said. “If he says he did not write *Noli me tangere*, I am sure he is telling the truth.”

The upshot was that the teacher’s displeasure was directed at the father as well as the son, and both returned home to report the incident to Pedro’s mother.

“You are both fools”, the mother said, when she heard the story. “Pedro should have confessed that he wrote *Noli me tangere*, and promised never to do it again.”
All kidding aside

In point of fact, there is all too little to laugh about in Third World villages. They are sites of grinding poverty, hunger, disease, ignorance and powerlessness. Nevertheless, I believe that impoverished villagers have the potential to overcome these age-old problems, if we can provide them with the knowledge and skills they need.

As Y.C. James Yen, the founder of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, says, “poor Third World villagers do not lack intelligence; what they lack is opportunity”. Given the opportunity, they already have the tools to build a better life for themselves. These tools include wisdom, courage, endurance and, last but not least, laughter.

The International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) is a world training centre dedicated to changing the quality of life for the rural poor in the developing nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Further information about its training programmes and the “analogy approach” to health education is available from IIRR, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, or from the IIRR office in the USA: IIRR, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1270, New York, New York 10115, USA.

Using the “agricultural analogy” method in a family planning class with Philippine villagers. Ovulation is compared to the familiar process by which a string bean extrudes its seeds.