Let’s Talk Health

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Health promotion with the help of the world’s postal services

The dissemination of information and the raising of funds are vital in the struggle to achieve health for all. A useful contribution towards meeting both of these requirements can be made through the imaginative use of postage stamps, cancellations and seals on items of mail.

Every year, many billions of items of mail pass through the world’s postal systems; every day, postage stamps carrying information, messages or slogans reach a substantial proportion of the global population.

Types of postage stamp

There are two main types of stamp—definitive and commemorative. Definitive stamps are produced in great quantity and are available for long periods, often many years, without change of design, whereas commemorative stamps are issued to mark particular events and remain on sale for only short periods. Most countries issue commemorative stamps several times a year; these issues are of particular importance in medical education and the promotion of health care.

The production of commemorative stamps is expensive if individual designing and printing are carried out. It is cheaper and quicker to overprint issues already in circulation, and stamps produced in this way can be made available at relatively short notice to mark unpredictable events. Overprinted stamps form an important part of medical issues used to generate funds for charitable and relief organizations. As a rule, overprinting is done on definitive stamps; simple lettering is usually employed, perhaps accompanied by internationally recognized symbols such as the Red Cross.

Also important in the promotion of health and medical education are charity issues, the surcharges on which are used to fund the organizations depicted on the stamps. A surcharge may be indicated in an
overprint on any particular stamp or may be incorporated in the design of a specific commemorative issue.

Charities

The International Red Cross has benefited more than any other body from the use of postage stamps. Issues connected with the organization have often clustered around times of disaster. Those that appeared during the First World War were overprinted stamps showing the Red Cross emblem and bearing a surcharge for the benefit of the organization (1). In general, the use of internationally recognized symbols is more effective than the rendering of messages in words.

The overprinting of stamps to benefit the International Red Cross was resumed after the Second World War. More recently, commemorative issues have replaced overprints, and modern printing and colour technology have allowed the production of more complex designs. The history of the organization can be traced on stamps; for example, its founder, Henry Dunant, and the Battle of Solferino, which had such a profound influence on him, are represented on a stamp issued in the Central African Republic in 1985 (2). In order to mark the centenary of the foundation of the International Red Cross in 1963, 137 countries produced special issues. Some of its functions are indicated in a series of four Finnish stamps (3). It should be noted that the Red Crescent has been substituted for the Red Cross in certain Muslim countries (4). Although some of the most effective promotion of health care has been achieved without the use of words, Denmark, in its issue of 1966, successfully used a verbal message that was understood in many countries. The stamp (5), inscribed *per humanitatem ad pacem*, shows both the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and gives the name of the organization in 32 languages.

Stamps bearing surcharges have also been issued for other charities, e.g., the stamps issued annually since 1929 in New Zealand to raise funds for the maintenance of children’s health camps (6). Stamps have been issued in many countries to obtain money for the treatment and prevention of tuberculosis, leprosy and other diseases, and to finance hospitals and sanatoria. Modern medical issues have included overprinted stamps following national disasters, such as the hurricane relief issue from the Grenadines of St Vincent in 1980, overprinted on a “Sport for all” commemorative stamp that was in circulation at the time (7).

Issues bearing the Cross of Lorraine or a double crescent, symbolizing the campaign against tuberculosis (8-12), have been widely used to promote education and vaccination against the disease, to raise funds for treatment, and to finance the establishment and operation of sanatoria. The successful use of pictorial rather than verbal messages is well illustrated in Vietnamese stamps issued in 1963 to promote BCG vaccination (13).

United Nations agencies

The emblem of the World Health Organization has appeared on stamps since
1948, the year of the agency’s foundation. Some commemorative issues have shown aspects of WHO’s work. Thus in 1973 Qatar issued stamps relating to the prevention of polio, malaria control, and mental health research, among other things (14). A special logo, introduced to publicize WHO’s antimalaria campaign in the 1960s, was used on stamps depicting methods of controlling the disease (15-17). The logo for the United Nations International Year of Disabled People, representing a disabled and an able-bodied person holding hands in mutual support, appeared on many stamps in 1981 (18,19).

The United Nations has issued stamps relating to health from Vienna, Geneva and New York. In 1964, 1973 and 1987, campaigns against drug abuse were promoted (20). In 1985 the UNICEF campaign for child survival received widespread publicity on stamps (21). The use of oral rehydration therapy to reduce infant mortality from diarrhoea has been clearly depicted on Nigerian and Gambian stamps (22,23).

Health campaigns

World Health Day is celebrated on 7 April each year to commemorate the entry into force of the WHO Constitution in 1948. Many of WHO’s health campaigns have been linked to this anniversary and promoted on postage stamps. A significant number of stamps were issued in 1978 to mark the global eradication of smallpox (24). The “Your Heart is Your Health” campaign of 1972 was supported by stamps issued from over 40 countries (25). The heart and circulation again received attention on stamps issued in April 1978, when the “Down with Hypertension” campaign was featured (26). Many stamps promoted the anti-smoking campaign of 1980. Pointed images about smoking have included skulls smoking, crosses made of cigarettes, and emaciated hands holding cigarettes (27,28). The more complex modern anti-smoking stamps show the claws of a crab, the symbol of cancer, approaching a smoker whose lungs have blood dripping from them (29).

World Leprosy Day has occasionally been marked by stamp issues. A stamp from Rwanda, for instance, shows Father Damien, a pioneer in caring for sufferers from the disease (30).

Appeals for blood donors have also been made on stamps (31). The promotion of child health has long been a theme illustrated on stamps, as has the encouragement of breast-feeding (32). Immunization programmes have often been advertised through the same medium (33,34).

Diseases

Widespread diseases like poliomyelitis have tended to be depicted in stamp issues in many countries (35–38), while diseases that are particularly prevalent in or confined to certain countries have received more restricted coverage, as with schistosomiasis (39,40), rabies (41), brucellosis (42), sleeping sickness (43), Chagas disease (44), and onchocerciasis(45).

Carlos J. Finlay first suggested that the mosquito Aedes aegypti was the vector of yellow fever in man. Educated in Cuba, in 1898 he was appointed as the country’s Chief Health Officer and President of the Board of Health. His work is honoured on Cuban stamps issued between 1934 and 1983. The 1983 stamp, commemorating the 150th anniversary of his birth, shows those issued in 1934 and 1965 (46).
Among other countries, Kuwait and Egypt issued stamps in 1971 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Banting and Best's demonstration that insulin could be used in the treatment of diabetes mellitus (47,48). In 1974 the Dominican Republic issued stamps as part of its campaign against diabetes, including the only stamp ever to have shown the pancreas (49). The retinal complications of diabetes are shown on the 1979 Austrian stamp commemorating the 10th World Congress of the International Diabetes Federation held in Vienna (50).

Among the many other diseases that have been featured on stamps are mental disorders (51), blindness from trachoma (52), dental caries (53), and arthritis (54).

**Postmarks, charity seals, stamp tabs**

Health messages can be presented on mail independently of the postage stamps that are used, thanks to the development of franking techniques. Examples are shown in cancellations from Luxembourg and the United Kingdom appealing for blood donors (55,56). Similarly, health establishments and charities have been advertised on letters posted in the United Kingdom (57-59). Health messages on cancellations can be very short and pointed, as, for instance, in an anti-smoking campaign promoted on mail dispatched by the British Medical Association in 1987 (60). A recent publicity campaign about AIDS in the United Kingdom included the following slogan printed on mail: "AIDS — don’t die of ignorance" (61).

Members of the public wishing to make charitable donations can sometimes do so via the mail and, at the same time, advertise the particular scheme or facility they wish to help. Charity labels have been made available in a few countries for this purpose. Although at first glance they resemble postage stamps they are not valid as such. They are purchased for the value appearing on the seal and affixed either to the back or front of the envelope in addition to the normal stamp. The charity seals illustrated come from Switzerland (62) and the USA (63).

Messages can also be provided on stamp tabs, as shown in the example from Poland (64). The purchaser has the choice of leaving the tabs attached when the stamps are affixed to letters. Such messages can be easily and cheaply produced.

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Health care has been promoted for many years through mail services. Good results have been obtained with overprinted definitive postage stamps, the more modern commemorative and charity issues, postmark slogans, and seals. Both education and fund-raising in the health field have benefited from these devices.
1. France, First World War, Red Cross
2. Central African Republic, 1985, Red Cross
3. Finland, 1964, Red Cross
4. Afghanistan, 1969, Red Crescent
5. Denmark, 1966, Red Cross and Red Crescent
6. New Zealand, children’s health camps
7. Grenadines of St Vincent, 1980, “Sport for all” (hurricane relief)
8. Finland, 1961, tuberculosis
9. Philippines, tuberculosis
10. Greece, tuberculosis
11. Belgium, tuberculosis
12. Somalia, 1982, tuberculosis
13. Viet Nam, 1963, BCG vaccination
14. Qatar, 1973; polio, malaria and mental health
15. Somalia, malaria control
16. Nigeria, malaria control
17. Nigeria, malaria control
18. Mauritania, 1981, handicapped
19. Ecuador, 1981, handicapped
20. United Nations, drug control
23. The Gambia, 1985, oral rehydration therapy
30. Rwanda, 1966, World Leprosy Day
31. USA, blood donors
32. Nigeria, 1988, breast-feeding
33. Central African Republic, immunization
34. El Salvador, 1985, immunization
35. France, poliomyelitis
36. Mali, 1982, poliomyelitis
37. Bolivia, poliomyelitis
38. Jordan, 1984, poliomyelitis
39. Egypt, 1975, schistosomiasis
40. Brazil, 1958, schistosomiasis
41. Trinidad and Tobago, rabies
42. Malta, 1964, brucellosis
43. Congo, 1981, sleeping sickness and malaria
44. Brazil, Chagas disease
45. Ghana, 1976, onchocerciasis
46. Cuba, 1983, 150th anniversary of Carlos J. Finlay's birth
47. Kuwait, 1971, insulin against diabetes mellitus
48. Egypt, 1971, diabetes mellitus
49. Dominican Republic, 1974, diabetes mellitus
50. Austria, 1979, diabetes mellitus
51. India, 1974, mental disorders
52. Swaziland, 1976, blindness from trachoma
53. Netherlands, dental caries
54. Maldives, 1977, arthritis
55. Luxembourg, 1970, blood donors
56. United Kingdom, 1949, blood donors