Information for all
by Dorothy Hoffmann

The existence of an informed public, who recognise their rights and responsibilities in determining their own health priorities and who take part in solving some of their health problems, is vital if the goal of Health for all is to be achieved by the year 2000. Information and education for health have been placed first among the eight essential elements of primary health care. It follows that people who work in mass media will be key actors in the drama which will be acted out in the next 14 years.

So, primary health care needs the media. But, even more important, Ministries of Health need the media. A recent series of workshops, initiated by WHO, financed by the Finnish International Development Agency (FINNIDA) and orchestrated by the University of Tampere, Finland, bore witness to the fact that health administrators and members of the mass media are not always in harmony. The three workshops, which took place in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia, brought together journalists, radio producers and health officials, and were the first lap in a comprehensive course to train journalists from East Africa in primary health care.

The mass media can be an instrument for delivering health messages but they must be given wholehearted backing by the health professionals. The journalists complained that ministry officials were not forthcoming with information about health trends and policies. Their questions were passed from one person to another and they never got precise answers. When news releases were issued, they were usually too technical and incomprehensible for the lay reader.

The health officials counterattacked by insisting that journalists were only interested in “sensational” news. What has been called “the silent emergency” of poverty and ill-health and the real news stories that were hidden in the health situation were never covered. A newspaper might announce the opening of a new health centre or the installation of a water pipe, but there was usually no background explanation of how it might affect the disease pattern or the lives of the community concerned. “News” about some high-technology medical gimmick was often considered more important by editors than the scandal of millions dying from a preventable disease.

Somehow, health officials and the media must find each other. Without the involvement of the media, the health sector cannot hope to create an informed general public. Without the health sector, the media cannot fulfil their obligation to serve the interests of the public.

The media workshops concluded that, not only was better collaboration needed between the Ministries of Health and the mass media, but also intersectoral collaboration between the different ministries. Many aspects of education, food production, water supply and housing were dealt with by separate ministries but had a direct impact on the health situation. It was

Workshops in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia brought together journalists, radio producers and health officials to discuss primary health care.

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"Without the media, the health sector cannot create an informed public. Without the health sector, the media cannot serve the interests of the public."

suggested that a task force comprising members from all these ministries should be formed in order to avoid overlapping or conflicting activities.

The participants in the workshops identified the major obstacles facing effective health education. These included such problems as illiteracy, the need for material produced in many different vernacular languages, religious and cultural taboos, the high cost of newsprint and difficulties in obtaining batteries for radio transistors. Health education campaigns were often felt to be badly planned and confusing. Spray your houses against malaria, said one message, while another encouraged people to keep their houses clean and to whitewash the walls twice a year. Eat more fish, said one message, but another advised that all ponds should be drained since there were breeding grounds for the vectors of disease. Participants agreed that it was no good trying to introduce new dietary practices if the foodstuffs being promoted were not available or too expensive. Nor is there much point in promoting personal hygiene if there is no soap, or, even worse, no water!

The workshops emphasised that, for health information and education to be effective, there is an urgent need for proper monitoring and evaluation of the impact. Many efforts made so far have failed through lack of planning and proper research into such questions as cultural and religious influences, levels of education, local resources and environment. Radio programmes addressed to women are useless unless they are transmitted at times when women are free to listen. Information intended for men should be presented where men are frequently found, such as in bars or at football games. Audience participation is also important, whether it be through public debates, radio programmes or question-and-answer pages in local newspapers. Issues on sensitive subjects such as family planning should involve those members of the community who have a strong influence, for instance grandmothers, village leaders or traditional healers. Messages need to be repeated frequently to achieve comprehension, acceptance and motivation leading to a change in behaviour.

Training is essential for everyone concerned in the struggle for health. Health officials need to master techniques of communication, and journalists need to recognise their social responsibility for health advocacy.

The English writer H. G. Wells said that “human history becomes more and more a race between communication and catastrophe. Full use of communication in all its varied strands is vital to ensure that humanity has more than a history—that our children are assured a future.” Health for all is a concept of hope for the future, and for that hope to be realised, every person should have an appreciation of the value of health, know how to achieve it, and how to guard it. In order to achieve Health for all, there must be information for all.