

# Communication as a Vehicle for Health Promotion in Contemporary Nigeria

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## Introduction

I thank the president and other members of the Executive, Health Promotion Research Association of Nigeria for giving me the opportunity to deliver a lead paper today. Communication as a vehicle for health promotion is very important theme to deliberate on at this time when so many people are still suffering from preventable diseases. I know that by the end of this conference a lot of input must have been made by the participants, especially in the area of various communication channels. I wish participants sound deliberation.

Communication can be explained in many ways. Communication is the activity of conveying information. It has been derived from the Latin word “Communis”, meaning to share. Communication requires a sender; a message, and an intended recipient, although the receiver need not be present or aware of the sender’s intent to communicate at the time of communication; thus, communication can occur across vast distances in time and space. The communication process is complete once the receiver has understood the message of the sender. Feedback is critical to effective communication between parties (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wikicomunication>).

Communication is the exchange of information (Vetentzas and Broni, 2010). In health programmes, the aims of this exchange are to reach a common understanding and to change or reinforce certain behaviours that promote health. It is the transmission of ideas from one mind to another. It follows that the message must be clear, indifference minimal and the reception good for this to be successful. Effective communication is a two-way affair, involving feedback and recurrent attunement to reduce interference.

Communication is the transfer of information from a sender (provider) to a receiver (client or community) using appropriate channels. It is important to know that when people communicate, the intention of the initiator of the communication is to transmit information and receive a feedback. But often times, there is no feedback and when this happens, it simply means that communication is not effective.

Vehicle for something means it can be used to express your ideas or feelings or as a way of achieving something like health promotion.

**Health Promotion** – Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health. It covers a wide range of social and environmental interventions that are designed to benefit and protect individual people’s health and quality of life by addressing and preventing the root causes of ill health, not just focusing on treatment and cure (Cottrell, R.R, Girvan, J.T. & Mckenzie J.F 2014; Nutbeam D, 1998).

## There are 3 key elements of health promotion

### 1. Good Governance for Health

Health promotion requires policy makers across all government department to make health a central line of government policy. This means they must factor health implications into all the decisions they take, and prioritize policies that prevent people from becoming ill and protect them from injuries.

### 2. Health Literacy

People need to acquire the knowledge, skills and information to make healthy choices, for example about the food they eat and healthcare services that they need. They need to have opportunities to make those choices. And they need to be assured of an environment in which people can demand further policy actions to further improve their health.

### 3. Health Communities

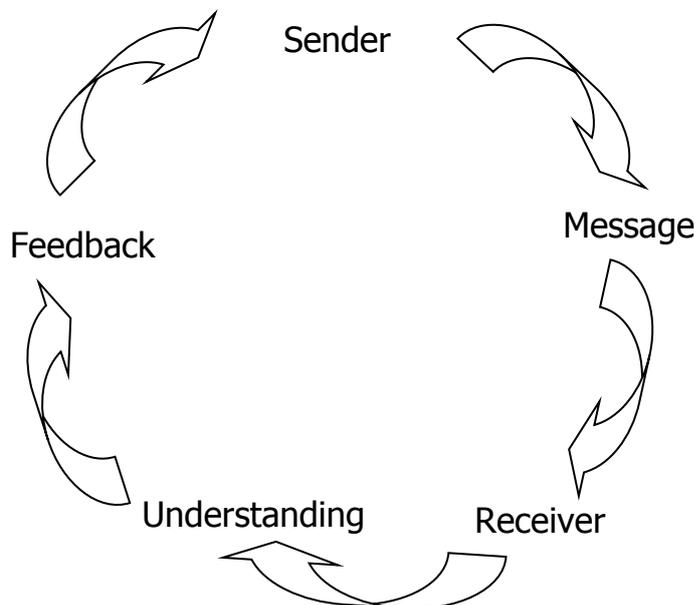
Communities have a key role to play in promoting good health. From healthy households evolve healthy communities and from healthy communities evolve healthy states and from healthy states evolve healthy countries and ultimately, healthier world.

## Components of Communication

The basic representative model of communication is usually conceptualized as a one-way flow process consisting of a sender, message and receiver (see Figure 1.1)



In addition to this, fourth and fifth variables can be added: complete understanding by that receiver and feedback to the communicator. These last two variables are important for health communication as they imply two-way communication, thus moving away from the traditional concept of one-way communication towards multi-way communication. It is also important to remember that communication is cyclic process involving a series of actions, thus a modified model can be represented as circular (see Figure 1.2). In health promotion communication is a planned process. The effectiveness of this planned process comes to fruition when the audience has achieved, acted on or responded to a message.



**Figure 1.2: Communication as a multi-way process.**

The content of a message contains verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication is (the words, sentences and phrases used). Non-verbal communication contains the four elements of prosodic, paralinguistic, kinesics and standing features:

- *Prosodic elements* include intonation and rhythm. These can influence how the sender delivers the message and the receiver interprets it. For example, comprehension would alter if the sender of a message spoke quickly or slowly.
- *Paralinguistic features* include vocal but non-verbal expressions like 'mmm' or 'ahhh'. These can alter the way messages are communicated, particularly in relation to the **prosodic** features described above.
- *Kinesic elements* include body language, eye contact, posture or gestures. For example, different interpretations of messages would be transmitted by a sender who was trying to maintain eye contact as opposed to a sender who was looking at their feet
- *Standing features* include factors such as appearance. Some people have pre-conceived notions of what practitioners who deliver health information should look like. This can include their dress, gender, ethnic group and other appearance-related factors.

Language and lexical content of the message is also important. Lexical content, which literally means the words, can be used positively or negatively. Using words from complex medical technology or abbreviating key terms can confuse messages and exclude the target audience, whereas using repetition has been positively found to influence communication.

As a health practitioner, the communication method will alter the importance of additional factors such as lexical content and body language. The communication process will dictate the aspects that are the most important. If you are sending every house in one area an information document about *prevention* of food-related

illness and hence have minimal contact with the client group, your appearance and eye contact will be of little importance. If you are delivering a brief one-to-one intervention on stopping smoking in a health care setting your verbal communication, eye contact or appearance will be important

### Communication in Health Promotion

Communication in health takes place on many levels, including individual, group, organization, community or mass-media. Communication in health can be defined in much the same way as communication has generally been defined: a transactional process. The main difference in communicating health is that the focus is not a general one but one specific to health information. This addition of 'health' to the definition of communicating as a 'resource' allows health messages (for example prevention, risk or awareness) to be used in the education and avoidance of ill health. This broad definition incorporates the fact that health communication can take place at many levels and embodies a *holistic* approach to health promotion.

Communication methods can be divided into one of five categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community and public/mass communication. Figure 1.3 illustrates these five hierarchical categories and gives examples of the type of communication methods that can be included in these categories. 'Intrapersonal' incorporates internal communication. This includes what we think or listen to internally. Interpersonal communication is communication on a personal level. This includes one-to-one communication or small group communication. 'Organizational communication' includes communication in an organization, both formal and informal. 'Community' communication includes mediums that are used in community settings, for example local radio and newspapers. 'Public/Mass' communication is large-scale and includes national and international communication.

Communication category	Example of communication medium
Intrapersonal	Internal communication (for example, what we think, when we listen to an inner-voice)
Interpersonal	One-to-one, small groups, emails, telephone calls and other activities that allow personal listening and responses
Organizational	Lectures, seminars, debates, meetings, memos, intranets, newsletters, workshop, displays
Community	Local radio, talks, seminars, debates, local newspapers, bill boards, bus wraps, health fairs
Public/Mass	Newspapers, television, digital television, national radio, internet, CD-ROMs, mobile phones.

*Fig. 1.3: Communication Categories*

### The 7 Characteristics of Effective Communication

#### 1. COMPLETENESS

To be effective, communication should be complete, i.e. it should include all the information the recipient needs to evaluate its content, solve a problem or make a decision. Complete communication reduces the need for follow-up questions and answers, and improves the quality of the overall communication process.

#### 2. CONCISENESS

Conciseness is not about keeping the message short, but rather about keeping it to a point. Conciseness in communication happens when the message does not include any redundant or irrelevant information. Concise communication prompts a better understanding of the message, because the recipient can focus on the key points and does not get distracted by a wealth of minor details.

#### 3. CONSIDERATION

When engaging in communication, a sender should always consider and value the recipient's needs, moods and points of view. Tailoring the contents and style of your messages based on their target audience strengthens the key points delivered within, as the sender can use argumentations and examples relevant to the recipient's experience, thus catering for a more thorough understanding of the message.

#### 4. CONCRETENESS

Effective communication happens when the message is supported by facts and figures. Concreteness in communication is also about answering to questions timely and consistently, and developing your argumentations based on real-life examples and situations rather than on general scenarios or theories.

Concreteness fosters effectiveness in communication, as the recipient gets a more comprehensive overview of the message and its implications.

#### 5. COURTESY

Courtesy in communication implies being respectful of the recipient's culture, values and beliefs. Also, it involves the need to adopt a register your audience, can easily relate to and understand. Courteous communication has a positive impact on the overall communication, as it prompts a more positive and constructive approach to the conversation.

#### 6. CLEARNESS

To be effective, communication has also to be clear and specific. To achieve clearness, the message should focus on a single objective, thus emphasizing its importance and catering for a prompt understanding of its contents. Clear communication also requires the adoption of the relevant terminology, thus reducing ambiguities and confusion in the communication process.

#### 7. CORRECTNESS

Using grammar and syntax correctly vouches for increased effectiveness and credibility of the message. In fact, grammar and syntax mistakes make it harder for the recipient to decode the message and understand its contents. Also, they have a negative impact on the overall communication, as they show that the sender hasn't taken his time to craft his messages more carefully.

### Health Communication Strategies

Health communication strategies can inform and influence large number of people on ways to improve their health. Examples of media strategies to convey health messages include the following components;

- Radio
- Television
- Newspaper
- Flyers
- Brochures
- Internet
- Social media

Using a variety of communication channels can allow health messages to shape mass media or interpersonal, small group, or community level campaigns, small or group in community level campaigns. Health communication strategies aim to change people's knowledge, attitudes and/or behaviours; for example

- Increase risk perception
- Reinforce positive behaviours
- Influence social norms
- Increase availability of support and needed services
- Empower individuals to change or improve their health conditions

### Effective health communication strategies include the following components:

- Use of research-based strategies to shape materials and products and to select the channels that deliver them to the intended audience.
- Understanding of conventional wisdom, concepts, language, and priorities for different cultures and settings.
- Consideration of health literacy, internet access, media exposure, and cultural competency of target populations.
- Development of materials such as brochures, billboards, newspaper articles, television broadcasts, radio commercials, public service announcements, newsletters, pamphlets etc.

### Communication Technologies and Health Promotion:

There are many technologies available for health promotion. We have internet, computer, website, WhatsApp and others.



### **Communication as a vehicle for health promotion: The case of monkey-pox disease.**

Health promotion which is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health. Health promotion is designed to benefit and protect individual, people's health and quality of life by addressing and preventing the root causes of ill health, not just focusing on treatment and care.

The spread of monkey-pox disease has been reported in some States of Nigeria.

Monkey-pox is caused by a virus previously isolated in animals like monkeys, rats, and squirrels. Human to human transmission only occurs through droplet infection, with direct contact with body fluids or lesions or materials that are indirect contact with sufferers. The virus is present in the blood, body fluids and secretions of infected rodents. Close contact with these mammals, when infected can increase the chances of a human outbreak.

Health education which is an aspect of health promotion is needed now to control this monkey-pox and other preventable diseases. As of now, there is no cure yet for the disease and health promotion is very important. Control and preventive measures should be carried out through adequate communication channels.

#### ***Preventive measures include***

1. Cook animal flesh or blood properly before eating
2. Regular hand washing is very important. Don't pick up stray animals
3. Keep your surroundings clean, clear the bushes, avoid rats and monkeys.

#### **Recommendations**

1. There is need to maintain personal hygiene. Wash your hands always especially after programmes.
2. Communication in health matters for health promotion should be accurate true and based on available scientific data. Fake news and false claims to cure some diseases by some individuals should be avoided.
3. Governments, Federal and State should increase their annual budgets in health promotion to these diseases like monkey-pox, and other diseases that have no cure yet.

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