

Bridging the gap between mass media journalists and health research scientists in Tanzania

V.P. MVUNGI*, L.E. MGONJA & A.Y. KITUA

National Institute for Medical Research, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Abstract: One of the core functions of any research Institution is to carry out research and promote utilization of research findings. Although the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) prides itself for tremendous achievements in both basic and operational researches, much has not been done as far as information dissemination is concerned. To-date, only a small portion of such information has found its way to the Tanzanian audience. This has been very much attributed to lack of proper mechanism to synthesize and disseminate scientific knowledge/information to the majority of the population. Realizing this gap in knowledge and information, NIMR has developed a forum that brings together mass media journalists and research scientists to share and discuss new research findings and synthesize the information in a user-friendly format that can be utilized by the general population. This paper gives highlights on the initiatives by NIMR geared towards regular provision of health research findings to the public through mass media. The challenges and way forward are discussed in line with the current health sector reforms taking place in the country.

Key words: media, journalist, scientists, health research, Tanzania

Introduction

Effective disease control requires prompt and adequate action towards reduction or elimination of existing conditions, and preventing the occurrence of new ones. Such actions can only be made if correct information reaches those required to take action (Mboera, 1998). Information is crucial for decision making at all levels of the health services. Policy and decision makers need information for rational decision making and better allocation of scarce resources; planners for the design of more effective programmes; district managers for monitoring and evaluation of the health services under their responsibility; health unit managers to ensure equitable access to the service offered; and most of all, care providers to provide quality care to their clients (L.E.G. Mboera, unpublished). In practice, the Tanzanian community is less aware of health information most likely because of lack of proper mechanisms for providing such information. There are several reasons for the gap in knowledge and information as outlined by Mboera (1998), to include (i) research gap; (ii) interpretation gap; (iii) dissemination gap; and (iv) reception gap.

A positive behavioural change in public health relies to a great extent not only on availability and accessibility of new knowledge, but also on the way such information is communicated. Public health tools may therefore remain unused or poorly utilised if not well packaged and communicated to effectively reach people and where necessary, supported by appropriate policies.

Accessibility of newly acquired knowledge in a user-friendly presentation can facilitate to a great extent the tasks of policy and decision-makers in substituting old ineffective policies by new effective ones for the purpose of improving the quality of public health services. Generally the language used in preparations of scientific reports is too technical and quite often difficult for lay people to understand the intended

messages. Apparently, presentation of research results in journals and other periodicals is most often not attractive enough to draw the attention of the public.

While researchers confine themselves to conducting research, and are too busy to spare any extra time to search for reliable means of disseminating their research findings, journalists complain of the difficulties they face in obtaining information from researchers. Several experts have reported the usefulness of mass media in promoting good health. It has been pointed out that mass media have a positive influence on the provision and utilization of health services. However, efforts are needed to ensure that reporting of health related issues by the lay media is correct and valid. It is a known fact that mass media is one of the best tools that may encourage the use of effective health services (PHRED 2001). It is believed that public attitudes towards health problems can be improved by efforts of health communication professionals (Turner, 1985). However, the author warns, that when using mass media in promoting good health the communicators should first identify the needs and interests of the intended audience, target the segments of the population most likely to be responsive and then match the media with the targeted population. He also recommended cultivating a relationship with reporters and editors so that the improvement of the health and well-being of the community will be a joint effort between media and health professionals. Correct knowledge will only be accepted when it has an expert endorsement and has been widely disseminated especially through the media (Yows, 1991).

Along similar lines, NIMR has recognized the benefit of bringing together researchers and journalists to discuss and develop scripts that can be used in promoting dissemination of the available scientific knowledge to the public. Following this recognition, in conjunction with the trust NIMR has in utilizing journalists for wider dissemination of research results, workshops have been organised to bring together researchers and mass media

*Correspondence to: Virdiana P. Mvungi, e-mail:vmvungi@yahoo.com

journalists to work as a team in developing messages for public consumption. In this paper, the outcomes of three workshops organized between March 2002 and September 2003 are reported and discussed. The main objective of the workshops were to create enabling environment for the health research fraternity and media community to work as a team in informing the public using information emanating from health research for human development.

Materials and Methods

Workshops were carried out to bring together mass media journalists and health research scientists. The approach used during the workshop was presentations by researchers addressing different health problems to an audience of journalists. Subsequently, discussions were made between researchers and the journalists to identify challenges met when reporting research findings. Problems faced by scientists in disseminating their research findings were also discussed. The entire task was deliberated on searching for a reliable and adaptable approach for the society to perceive important messages concealed in scientific papers.

Topics for presentation were solicited from among health scientists working with the National Institute for Medical Research, Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences and Ministry of Health, the resource institutions for facilitators. Workshop organizers identified and informed research scientists on the selected topics for presentation. Each scientist was requested to prepare a presentation in simple language (avoiding scientific jargons) with minimal numbers of figures or tables. The selection of media personnel considered individuals who had historically shown interests in reporting health issues to the public. Identification of topics for presentation took into consideration the national health priorities in Tanzania. The three workshops of three days each were organized in Mwanza, Morogoro and Tanga.

Facilitators (scientists) were given 40–60 minutes for a single presentation depending on the nature of the

messages to be imparted to participants. Each presentation was followed by a plenary discussion of 30–40 minutes. Soon after plenary discussions, the media personnel formed two groups, which spent about 30–60 minutes to prepare summaries from the presentations. Thereafter, each group made a presentation of the summary to the plenary for discussion and refinement to develop a press release for the mass media to disseminate.

Running concurrently with the workshops, were the video shooting of major events to take coverage of the workshop activities by the respective television crews. The journalists also had opportunities to interview presenters. Parts of the information extracted from the presentations and interviews were channelled to televisions and radio to be broadcasted. In one occasion, the workshop organizers granted the media group a chance to present a paper on the difficulties of obtaining scientific information from scientists.

Results

Four to five topics were addressed in each of the three workshops as shown in Table 1.

The journalists were drawn from the prominent Televisions, Radios and Newspapers organizations in Tanzania. The televisions included *Televisheeni ya Taifa* (TVT), Independent Television (ITV), Dar es Salaam Television (DTV) and Star TV. Radios were Radio Tanzania Dar es Salaam (RTD), Radio Tumaini, Radio Free Africa and Radio Sauti Mwanza. The newspapers were The Guardian, The Daily News, Uhuru and Mtanzania. Other media included the Mwanza Press Club. Whereas invitations for radio and newspaper representations considered a single person, two people including a reporter/editor and a shooter normally represented TV stations. For each workshop, 17 mass media personnel attended.

Table 1: Health subjects and topics covered during the 3 workshops

Subject	Topics covered presentations	Number of
Malaria	1. The new malaria treatment policy 2. Malaria treatment using Sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine 3. Malaria research in Tanzania	4
Lymphatic filariasis	Lymphatic filariasis in Tanzania	1
HIV/AIDS	HIV/AIDS and its impact on health services in Tanzania	2
Helminthiasis	1. Epidemiology of intestinal schistosomiasis 2. Epidemiology of soil-transmitted worms 3. Control of soil transmitted worms 4. Control of schistosomiasis	4
Tuberculosis	Tuberculosis problem in Tanzania	1
Trypanosomiasis	African human trypanosomiasis: a silent growing public health problem	1
Disease surveillance	Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response	1

Table 2: Number and source of Journalists during the 3 workshops

Type of media	Media organisation	No of journalists
Television	Independent Television (ITV)	6
	<i>Televisheeni ya Taifa</i> (TVT)	6
	Dar es Salaam Television (DTV)	6
	Star TV	2
Radio	Radio Tanzania Dar es Salaam	5
	Radio One	1
	Radio Free Africa	3
	Radio Tumaini	2
	Radio Sauti	1
Newspapers	The Guardian	3
	Daily News	2
	Mtanzania	4
	Uhuru	4
Others	Msanii Africa	1
	Mwanza Press Club	1
	TANESA	1
Total		49

Discussion

In total, the three workshops generated 28 media reports, two from each of the fourteen presentations delivered by the facilitators. Through television and radio broadcastings, the general public was enabled to hear all the messages picked up from the press releases linked to each presentation. The information had also reached individuals working in different offices and various places within the country through newspapers published articles. The media tools involved in the dissemination of the information from the workshops were those represented at the meetings.

It could be helpful to have all the press releases originated from the three workshops appear in this report for readers to enjoy the details of the activities of the workshops and for clarity of any aspect or issues prompted during the discussions conducted in respect to each presentation. Unfortunately, it could not be worthwhile to incorporate such a passage in this text, as it was very long, over thirty pages. All the same, the public was enabled to hear the news from each report as broadcasted through the media tools sent a representative at the workshop.

It was established in these of workshops, 30 minutes were adequate periods for the journalists to summarise and generate reputable reports accepted by the plenary as press releases for news production. This approach was found to minimise misquotation that were usually complained by scientists. Similar achievements have been reported before by Ijumba *et al.* (2003).

The magnitude of the efforts spent by the facilitators in clarifying tangible issues while addressing their presentations was reflected by the quality of reports the journalists prepared for news production. Apparently, the mistakes encountered and corrected during the plenary sessions were minimal.

Through discussion it was realised that both the journalists and scientists were enabled to understand the concepts of each of the presented topics, and for the part of the journalists had the opportunity to show the scientists "what is considered news" as far as media is concerned. The user-friendly language that was used during presentations enhanced all participants to correctly perceive intended messages imparted from each paper presented. In these undertakings, the presenters were keen to avoid using scientific jargons and other complicated language and figures, therefore enabled the audience to perceive easily the notion of each presentation. Most often, the language used by scientists in preparing scientific papers is too complicated for lay audiences. Such situations usually drive non-scientific people to lose interest in reading and/or reporting them in public media.

Following the workshop, the Institute received a number of calls from various media groups seeking for research findings. In addition, more journalists continued to visit the Institute looking for information needed for feature article production. Although it is premature to make valid conclusion of the impact of the workshop, it is our conviction that such workshops would provide an impact on inducing some behavioural changes in societies with respect to the topics addressed. This is probably, because most of the media (especially the radio and newspapers) reach a large proportion of the Tanzanian population within a short time period.

In conclusion, most often the language used by scientists in preparing scientific papers is too complicated for ordinary audiences. Such a situation drives non-scientific audiences to hesitate reading those reports no matter how important the messages are. Journalists are therefore, important people in any community as they play a big role in educating, informing and entertaining the community. The task of journalists is to communicate knowledge, concepts, judgments, critics and all kinds that contribute to behavioural changes among the people. They

have the ability to influence, persuade and transform the society. Through journalists any kind of information whether scientific or non-scientific can reach the community.

Advocacy through the media has been identified by other authors as one of the most effective ways of delivering information to the targeted audience. In Tanzania, the media may serve as a conduit of information in a two-way flow between the Ministry of Health or Government and the targeted community. As such, media can be an important tool to bring about desired behavioural change in the community (Ijumba *et al.*, 2003).

Educating a society depends on availability of knowledge or information needed to influence changes to correspond with existing situation. Having new knowledge at hand, without establishing proper mechanisms for its dissemination is considered to be a waste. The success of bringing scientists and journalists in similar forums has facilitated an improvement in reporting of scientific information. Such collaborations are thought to be the way forward in the dissemination of scientific information in resource poor countries such as Tanzania. Through such forum, it is also envisaged that journalists would build confidence in reporting health research issues and gain courage in contacting researchers for more information. Likewise, researchers will stand a chance to respect journalists in reporting their findings.

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