

Raising awareness to empower communities to take action

This article was compiled by **Paddy Ricard**, with the help of practical tips on raising community awareness by **Hannah Ayukawa, Heide Beinhauer, Valerie Newton, Padman Ratnesar** and **Andrew Smith**.

We should not assume that once people have been informed about what can be done to maintain or improve ear health, they will then change their behaviour accordingly. In practice, this is rarely the case.

Firstly, simply delivering a health message does not ensure that it has been understood. Secondly, even when your messages are understood by the community, an awareness of the factors affecting ear and hearing health is only the first stage towards adopting healthier behaviours. Individuals must then be willing to try a new behaviour and have the means – or be given the means – to do so. Finally, they must adopt the behaviour until it becomes a routine habit.

The challenge of changing behaviour

Obstacles to behavioural change

We all find it difficult to change our behaviour, even when we know it will improve our health or quality of life. For example, in a high-income country with straightforward access to services, a hearing-impaired person might put off being fitted for a hearing aid because they are embarrassed to admit to themselves or show to others that they have a hearing loss. Changing behaviour is difficult for many reasons:

- Many of our daily health habits are automatic. To change behaviour, people must act consciously: this requires focus, time and commitment, which might be in short supply, particularly when our living conditions are difficult.
- In smaller communities, particularly, people tend to be 'stuck' in traditional or social hierarchies and are often reluctant to really take initiative or challenge the system.
- Behavioural change usually requires new resources or a re-allocation of existing resources (e.g. building latrines, travelling to a health centre, buying ear protection). This is more difficult when resources are scarce or people have little control over them.

Factors enabling behavioural change

Facts for Life, a resource on maternal and child health produced by a coalition of international bodies such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization, summarises the success factors for changing behaviour: People are more likely to change their behaviour when:

- They are encouraged to discuss a health message among themselves and to ask questions to clarify their understanding.
- They have been shown, and fully understand, how they, their family and community will benefit from changing their behaviour.
- The language used to communicate with them is familiar and compatible with the local culture and social norms, avoiding judgmental or prescriptive-sounding 'orders'.
- The person presenting the message or the source of information is well known and trusted.

- They hear repeated, simple and consistent messages from different sources.
- They are given time to change, especially if the change carries a cost, such as the installation of latrines.¹

Engaging with the community

Most of the factors essential to behavioural change require a two-way communication process between the health worker or health educator and community members. An ongoing dialogue will allow you to:

- Ensure your health message has been understood.
- Build trust and mutual respect.
- Understand the community's current behaviours, preoccupations, and living conditions.
- Become aware of obstacles to behavioural change and find acceptable solutions with the community.
- Empower the community to take charge of their own health.

Involving the community in practice

Recruiting local collaborators

- If you do not belong to the community or do not know it well, enlist the help of a person who does and who fully understands the aim and methods of what you are trying to do (and possibly some of the technical aspects).
- If you do not speak the local language, it will also be essential from the outset to enlist the help of a reliable and well-educated translator.
- Involve, or at least get the approval of, the local health system if you are not part of it, and get the help – or at least the acquiescence – of local health personnel.

Respecting the structure of the community

Make an effort to understand how the community is organised. It is important to establish and use the correct channels of communication, e.g. through the local headman, the regional councillors, etc.

Identify community leaders on various levels (political, traditional, church). Engage with them, e.g. by asking them what they do, listening to their concerns and suggesting what they can do for the community. They are very likely to ask others to join them.

Once you have engaged with leaders, contact other members of the community. This can be done in many ways: home visits; meetings with parents, mothers and workers. If you get the children to trust you, the elders will be more likely to work with you. It is also important to speak to hearing-impaired people in the community and to ask them to be advocates for your campaign.

Asking questions and understanding behaviour

Whilst you may think that your health message is too important not to be acted upon, community members may have more pressing concerns requiring their attention. They may also think of practical or cultural reasons why they cannot follow your advice. It is therefore important to ask people what they



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want rather than telling them what you want. Find out about the community's needs, preoccupations, living conditions, and the difficulties they would face if they were to change their behaviour.

You should also enquire about the community's current behaviours in relation to health (do they go to traditional healers first? what are their main health concerns?). Knowing this 'baseline' behaviour will help you determine whether there has been any change later.

You may also find it useful to conduct a Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) survey, or organise focus group discussions and structured interviews.²

Encourage ownership

You may know what community members should be doing differently, but they hold the key to how this can be achieved in their context.

Try putting community members 'in charge' as they know best what might work in their particular circumstances. Empower them to find solutions, identify individuals with leadership skills and form coalitions of the willing.

Often, once members of the community have developed a greater awareness for a specific topic, they tend to identify other areas of concern. They also start trusting each other, and

helping each other more than before they took action together to improve their health.

“Raising awareness and empowering people to take action is a long-term endeavour, requiring a variety of means of communication”

Communicating your message

Key principles

- **Simplify messages.** Use simple and practical language, be brief and avoid technical details.
- **Break down information into 'digestible' bits** that can easily be put into practice by your audience in their context. Giving out too many recommendations at once can be confusing, overwhelming or discouraging.
- **If needed, adapt your health message to your context.** For example, state how a change of behaviour will benefit this particular community.
- **Pre-test your message** on a few community members or on a small community and make necessary adjustments before circulating it more widely.
- **If needed, use reliable translators** to translate your message into local languages.

Interpersonal communication

Group meetings or one-to-one communication allow for more interaction with community members and encourage ownership. The following may be helpful:

- **Visual aids (such as drawings, posters or writing on a board)** help your audience to understand what you are talking about and remember the content of your message.
- **Videos are particularly useful** and, in the present age, people tend to expect audiovisual presentations. You might also consider filming some demonstrations and discussions to encourage participation and show at a later date.
- **Demonstrations, perhaps with the help of a colleague,** can be helpful when speaking to a group. For example, you could show what it is like to have a hearing loss, or show what happens when people have their hearing tested at the clinic. When demonstrating an action you want people to replicate, audience participation is essential.
- **You can give your audience a leaflet or information sheet to take home** and read, which will help them remember your message.
- **SMS reminders** can be used to inform people of meeting dates and locations. Mobile phone use is widespread and people tend to keep their numbers.
- **Consider organising some of your meetings in locations that are relevant to your message.** E.g., in the Inuit community where noise-induced hearing loss is a major problem, the audiology team (see page 9) attends loud music concerts to give information about noise damage and distribute earplugs.
- **Think of more playful ways to engage people.** For example, you could organise the performance of a short play. You could also organise a raffle in which people must fill out a form about noise effects to participate.

Mass media

- **Explore what media works best for your community.** Ask them how they usually communicate, where they get their news from and which media have their preference. It might not be the print media if illiteracy is an issue or if people can only speak but not read a local language. Perhaps they would respond to community radio or an SMS campaign.
- **Make your message clear, simple and easy to remember.** For example, CLaSH (see page 10) used the following catchphrases for radio adverts and banners: 'No hearing does not mean no sense', 'My eyes can hear, my hands can talk'. You could also refer to Helen Keller's observation that, if blindness cuts us off from things, deafness cuts us off from people.
- **Make sure your message is broadcast at an appropriate time,** when your target audience is usually listening or watching.

Conclusion

Raising awareness and empowering people to take action is a long-term endeavour, requiring a variety of means of communication. Involving community members will enhance your chances of success and help you overcome some of the obstacles to changing behaviour.

¹ *Facts for Life* contains a useful and practical chapter on changing behaviour, which can be found online: <http://www.factsforlifeglobal.org/00/guide.html>

² For an example of how to conduct a KAP survey, see: http://www.stoptb.org/assets/documents/resources/publications/acsm/ACSM_KAP%20GUIDE.pdf