

What does it take to change behaviour? Kicking bad habits

A series of papers have been published by the Kings Fund, a foundation which seeks to explore ideas that could change health care approaches, based in London.

The fourth paper in the series by Anna Dixon looks at motivation and confidence engendered by the National Health Service encouraging individual responsibility for healthy behaviours. This paper looks at what NHS interventions could encourage healthier behaviours – such as reducing obesity, sedentary lifestyles, poor diet and smoking.

The second paper looks at using information to promote healthy behaviours by Ruth Robertson. In 2005/6 the UK government spent £30 million on adverts to stop smoking and have launched a £75 million marketing programme to encourage children to exercise and eat healthily.

The paper identifies that the effectiveness of ‘one way’ information portrayed via leaflets, posters, internet radio and broadcast is dependent on: Social norms and capabilities to change.– looks at intentions – and what is perceived as normal – and achievable; Key factors in the success of campaigns depends on the source – i.e. is the deliverer credible, attractive and interesting?; Proper assessment of the target audience and their motivations (personality, literacy and lifestyle); Analysing the desired outcome properly – i.e. are you looking to change an attitude or promote a new behaviour?

The process of an individual responding to a message long

term is divided into concise steps for the planner – the message reaching them effectively, the target taking notice of it, their liking its approach and understanding it. Feeling able to respond to what it suggests, giving in and saying yes I’ll do it, remembering the message and changing the behaviour long term, being able to remember the message long term (such as eat five fruit and vegetable portions a day, or national responsible drinking guidelines). These steps into a ‘process of persuasion’. The paper discusses public perception of government messages being seen by the public as ‘preachy, boring and too much like hard work’. Therefore the collective use of a similar message by industry, charity and government is suggested.

The messages on responsible daily drinking guidelines are believed to only be partially effective (21% recall by adults in 2003) as they have been presented over the last decade as daily or weekly, with differing numbers of alcohol free days, different messages for sexes and units not equating to ‘drinks’.

A ‘gain frame’ is seen as more effective – i.e. the positives of changing behaviour, rather than focusing on the negatives – e.g. you’ll live longer if you eat for fruit and vegetables, rather than you’ll die younger if you continue with you present lifestyle.

High sensation messages are required in some circumstances, such as discouraging drink drive.

Consistent exposure to the message is also seen as fundamental – hence the development of a ‘brand’ that

provokes loyalty and a consistent path of message and deliver over time is fundamental to long term effectiveness.

The report concludes that information has an important role to play in influencing behaviours such as smoking and alcohol consumption. Effective campaigns must come from a trusted source, have content that attracts the target audience and include messages that impact on perceptions of social norms (i.e. most drink sensibly). ‘Passive information provision’ is seen as only one link in the chain of delivering change as skills to change and services to support the change are also fundamental.

A long term approach from the NHS must be delivered as the UK’s unhealthy habits are deep-rooted within society and can not be addressed by short term measures.

Key recommendations from the report include:

- The NHS needs to make better use of social marketing techniques and data analysis tools to identify, target and effectively communicate messages and motivate people to change how they live.
- Public health programmes shouldn’t rely on just one approach such as information campaigns or financial incentives as the evidence shows the most effective behaviour change interventions employ a variety of tactics.
- A robust evaluation of short and long-term changes in behaviour and health outcomes should be made a requirement of all public

health programmes in order to build an evidence base for the future.

- Frontline staff should be more proactive in promoting healthy habits to the patients they see

every day and for contracts and incentives to be used to encourage such behaviour.

- Government departments and local agencies involved in tackling unhealthy behaviours must better

coordinate their efforts and ensure that targets are agreed to support their shared objectives.

To view the reports see http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/current_projects/kicking_bad_habits/index.html