

Summary

THE CITIZEN AT THE CENTRE OF HEALTH COMMUNICATION

This forum explores the relationships between Health Sector, Media and the Citizens. Increasingly in the information society citizen centred communications are important in the development and delivery of health services. One of the most important questions thereby is, how the health sector can utilise New Media to improve health information for the citizen.

Petra Wilson (DG Information Society) reports about the possibilities of new technologies, which simplify the work of the doctor. Thereby not only the results of Doctor-patient- talks are preserved, treatment strategies can also be designed by the new software. Technical improvement does not mean to replace the communication between doctor and patient, it only should support the doctor's work.

The patient of today is a knowledgeable one, he is informed, he wants to be offered alternatives of treatment by his doctor. The Internet has a great impact for him in terms of access to information. Tim Nater (Health Online) does not only mention the rights of the patient (to ask questions, to query diagnosis), but also his duties: the patient should learn ,how' to surf, he should have some basic knowledge, and he should show respect for the doctor's work, who for his part may have to learn to see the patient as a partner.

Advertisements in mass media are a good example for how successful communication may work. Gerard Hastings (social scientist) describes it as follows: it is audience-centred, it takes the feelings of the audience into account, emotions are rather communicated than rational arguments. If Health Services want to communicate their ideas successfully they have to take the circumstances of the citizens into account.

Public Health Services, who want to communicate on the Internet, have multiple goals: they want to offer solid, high-quality information, they want to consult the patient as good as possible, and last but not least always care for the patient's rights. On the other hand they have to present themselves as attractively as possible, because there are so many services provided by the net. To get this attention they have to trust themselves in going unusual ways, Franklin Apfel (WHO Europe) thinks. To popularise health care problems they have to be presented in soap-operas rather than in leaflets.

Successful advertisement does not in the first respect aim at transaction but wants to create a relationship between customer and the product. Relationship marketing relies on long-term strategies, to keep the customer a loyal one, the company is very well informed about the customer's lifestyles. McDonald's its most often mentioned example for the American culture imperialism, the company is also a perfect representation of relationship marketing, says Martin Caraher (Centre for Food Policy).

The tobacco industry is in the better position compared to non-smoking-campaign, because it does not tell the citizen what to do (not). Although it does have to warn the consumer of the health risks of smoking, but does it with a legal text and nobody "wants to be told what to do by

some bureaucrat from Brussels or by the government", says Andrew Hayes (WHO Committee for a tobacco-free Europe). For a while the tobacco industry does not negate the risks of tobacco consumption any more, but it argues, that it does not want to decide for the consumer. It is one of the most striking problems of Health Services, that their interests are perceived as patronising.

The citizen should be at the centre of health communication, the kind of media used does not change that, as it does not change the basic principles of communication itself. Health Services have to keep in mind, that the patients mistrust single-source information. When designing health actions the aim, a change of behaviour is not to be forgotten, but the consumer/patient has to be treated in an other way. Health should have a positive connotation, it should not be related to something boring, patronising or tiresome.

The role of new technologies concerning the relationship between doctor and patient should be a supportive one, that simplifies the work of the doctor and provides information for the patient, and thus enables him to take responsibility for his own health. The communication between doctor and patient is not replaced, it is more important than ever.

In the future, public national or international Health Services will be responsible to set quality standards, although they may not be legally authorised to assess the Internet presentation of others, they are supposed to keep an eye on the developments in New Media.